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### A Fundamental Truth

(Tenth in series, *Christian Wisdom for Life, Ten Easy Verses*)

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. –John 3:16-*

(Supporting Text: John 3:1-21)

No matter how we might or might not agree with him at any given point, few may quibble with the notion that one of the great theologians of the twentieth century was the Swiss thinker Karl Barth. Like other brilliant scholars he wrote so much that it is difficult to read it all. Recognizing his prolific authorship he was once asked by a reporter how he might summarize in one sentence the basic assertion of the Christian faith. Barth replied, *Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*<sup>1</sup>

It may be important for us from time to time to carry deeply in our awareness something basic about our faith, something the meaning of which is immediately clear to us, something we can then apply to the more complex issues of life. Barth may not have been the only one asked such a question. A need for a basic conceptualization of things, a basic faith axiom if you will, may have been behind the question Jesus was once asked, *which commandment is the first of all?* In that case Jesus replied, *Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Mark 12:29-31)* I have on the wall in my office a needlecraft rendering that Debbie made for me, in the King James English, of a favorite biblical text of mine. It helps to serve the purpose for me of keeping clear the basics of faithful Christian life. It may be a familiar verse to you. *What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6:8)*

There is a verse in the gospel reading this morning which has served for many of us as a sort of summary of Christian faith. Perhaps you have even memorized it. It is John 3:16. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.* It is a beautiful verse of scripture, deep in meaning, rich in tradition. The thing is, I am not sure that its meaning is always so simple, at least as we might be thinking now of ideas which require minimum thought

in order to be understood. To think about it, John 3:16 contains some rather complicated proposals. There is the phrase, *only Son*. What does it mean for God to have a Son? There is also the phrase, *everyone who believes in him*. Volumes have been written about that! What does it mean to believe in this Son? Then there is that phrase *eternal life*. Is that something which starts now or is it just for the future, and what kind of life is it? I realize that theologians can be a lot like lawyers sometimes and make more commotion about one word or phrase than one word or phrase ever deserves, but still it seems to me that John 3:16 might not be so basic.

However, what if we took just the first part of it? What if we really embraced just the first part, *For God so loved the world*, and carried that truth around within us among our spiritual bones. What if just the very first part of John 3:16 became a proverb within us, an available maxim to apply to the world whenever we call it to mind? Wouldn't that make all the difference in how we understand everything else, in how we feel about everything else, in how we respond to everything else? *For God so loved the world*. No matter what else we might consider after that, the first thing remembered, the thing always coming to mind is that *God so loved the world*. There is a God, and that God so loved the world.

In the remarkable academic tome, *Does God Exist?*, Hans Kung traces the history of thinking about God and suggests that the most important question facing humanity at any time, and facing modern people no less particularly, is what Kung calls the "fundamental alternative." The fundamental alternative is that we can choose to place a fundamental trust in the world or we can choose not to fundamentally trust the world. For Kung, whatever choice we make is all the difference. If in our deepest heart we trust that there is a benevolence behind reality, an unwavering goodness no matter what we see and no matter what appears, in that case our experience of life and approach to life will be radically different than if we fundamentally distrust reality, consider it to be ambivalent to humanity, ultimately suspicious and doubtful. For Kung, to choose fundamental trust does not mean that we think everything that happens is good or that we embrace an uncritical optimism. To place fundamental trust in reality does not mean that we adopt a posture in all circumstances of Susie or Sammy Sunshine. For Kung, the question is the deep one, the one which is decided without reference to any specific things but in response to existence itself. Shall I trust that there is meaning to life or shall I not? Shall I trust that life matters or shall I not?<sup>2</sup>

Kung would say that to give a fundamental 'yes' to reality is to be a religious person, it is to begin living on a religious level. On Pentecost, 1961, Dag Hammarskjöld, then Secretary General to the United Nations wrote,

*I don't know who — or what— put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer yes to someone— or*

*something— and from that hour I was certain that existence was meaningful, and that, my life, in surrender, had a goal.*<sup>3</sup>

Four months later Hammarskjöld died on a mission of peace to central Africa.

Would it be fair to borrow from Kung's idea of fundamental trust, to extend it and say that there is a fundamental truth, a truth which if accepted goes deeper than any other truth, a truth that is reliable no matter what, a truth that is beyond question because it is the answer to the most primary question of all? *For God so loved the world.* Good heavens, if that's true, what a difference it makes!

I like Kung's phraseology, but then I am tempted to ask this question. If we choose for ourselves a fundamental trust not just in bland reality but even a fundamental trust in a fundamental truth of the Christian faith, that God so loved the world that he gave his Son that we might see in him God's love and take confidence in it and live by it, then what does that make us? Are we then, fundamentalists? For some of us that might not go down so well! And yet, in this way that is exactly what it makes us. For whom would that title be more appropriate than for those who might choose fundamental trust in a fundamental truth and yet who are willing to yield miles of words on less weightier questions of life and theology? These would be the people who lay a firm foundation and then allow for creative preference about the shape and style of the structure to be built upon it. One of the problems I have had with some who like to call themselves fundamentalists and who would sometimes be identified that way by modern theological nomenclature is that they often seem to emphasize a lot more than fundamentals. I see a lot more than fundamentals in the insistence upon adherence to certain lifestyles or belief in the vicarious substitutionary atonement theory of the crucifixion, or the insistence upon adopting a certain political point of view.

*For God so loved the world.* This is a fundamental truth worthy of the title. To believe this is to have steadiness no matter what may be changing. To believe this is to be able to face the foibles of others as well as of ourselves, to accept them, to forgive them, to grow from them. We can use absolute terms here. We can thoughtfully say 'always' here. No matter what, we are always loved.

More poetic are the words of St. Paul.

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*  
(Romans 8:37-39)

1. Mark Galli, *Christians Everyone Should Know*, Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000.
2. Hans Kung, *Does God Exist*, trans., Edward Quinn, Doubleday & Company, Inc./ Garden City, New York, 1980. Part II *Fundamental Mistrust and Fundamental Trust* pp.442-447.
3. Dag Hammerskjold, *Markings*, Knopf, New York/Faber, London, 1964, p.169. As quoted in Hans Kung, *Does God Exist?* P. 442.