FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

John 3:16. It’s arguably the most precious, most well-known verse in the entire Bible.

“For God so loved my church and people who look like me and think like me and have the same political and social views I have. . .”

No, wait. That’s not what John 3:16 says, is it? John 3:16 goes, “For God so loved the world . . .”

Why is it that we who follow Jesus Christ and belong to Christ’s Body, the church, need to keep learning and relearning this lesson? Not the words, “for God so loved the world,” because we have them down pat. I’m talking about the spirit and the truth behind those words.

How come we need to be constantly reminded that we aren’t the exclusive recipients of God’s love in Jesus Christ? Why doesn’t it stay with us for our entire lifetime that Christ came to save, not only us, but all people.

Even the people we can’t stand. Even the people we despise. Even the people we consider enemies, who have caused us terrible pain and done us irreparable harm.

Yes, God came to save them, too. In fact, it could be argued that such “dastardly” people need saving by Christ more than anyone.

But it kind of sticks in our craw, doesn’t it? It goes down our gullet like a razorblade sandwich. Because we all know somebody—maybe even a number of somebodies—whom we judge to be unworthy of God’s love.

Don’t we?

I personally could rattle off the names of three or four people I know whom I believe God’s needs to seriously reconsider loving. Are you sure, Lord? Have you actually looked at the record of their lives?

How could you possibly love and want to save them?

None of those unlovable people are here in this sanctuary, by the way.

It’s a genuine challenge to digest the fact that the bounds of God’s love in Jesus don’t end with us. They don’t end within the confines of this congregation. They don’t end here in Scarborough. Or in the state of Maine. Or even in the United States of America.

Yes, on this Memorial Day weekend, as we remember the heroes who gave their very lives in service to this great country of ours, John 3:16 reminds us that even people who aren’t Americans are going to be allowed
through the pearly gates of God’s heavenly realm.

Why? Because God so loved, not just America, but the whole wide world.

In Jesus’ homecoming sermon preached to his Nazarene family, friends and neighbors and recorded in the fourth chapter of Luke’s Gospel, our Lord reminded the congregation about God’s past history of loving and showing mercy to outsiders: how the prophet Elijah miraculously fed the starving widow of Zarephath; and Elisha healed Naaman, a commander in the Syrian army. Both were Gentiles, non-Jews.

And may I remind you that, for his attempt to teach about the wideness of God’s mercy and open the minds of his listeners in the pews, the congregation attempted to literally throw Jesus off a cliff. To kill him.

Why?

Because believing that God’s love goes beyond the confines of myself and my family and friends; to insist that God’s love isn’t limited to my denomination, my race, my sexual orientation, my political party or my views on immigration, abortion or gun control; to have absolute faith that God’s love is for everyone—with no exceptions—and that, therefore, we’re to love everyone, too, because now we’re all family under Christ—well, that’s unsettling. It’s disturbing. It’s not totally acceptable to many of us.

In this morning’s reading from Luke’s Gospel, a powerful man asked Jesus for help. But he wasn’t just a prominent person. He was a Roman military leader and an enemy of Israel, a centurion in charge of at least one hundred other Roman soldiers. In reality, this man should have been one of the most loathed and despised people in town, because the Empire he served and pledged allegiance to, Rome, had their boot firmly planted on the neck of Judea.

But although this centurion was prominent and powerful, he discovered that, in some matters of great significance, he was powerless. His beloved servant was gravely ill, and probably was going to die. Though the centurion was a master, he found himself a slave to his servant’s illness. So he sent some messengers to Jesus, to ask for his help.

I’m fascinated that the centurion didn’t go to Jesus personally. He could have tried to impress Jesus, or even intimidate him by showing up at one of Jesus’ rallies with a contingent of mean-looking, impressively dressed guards. But the centurion didn’t do that. And he revealed the reason why later on in the gospel reading.

He didn’t go to Jesus because he felt that he was unworthy. And even when Jesus went to him, the centurion sent out messengers to say, “Jesus, don’t come in my house. I’m not worthy. Just say the word and heal my
servant. That’s all I ask.”

Try to comprehend just how amazing that must have been. The shock people must have felt when they witnessed that. It would be something like having the President of the United States call and request your services, and you go to the White House but the President remains in the Oval Office, with the door closed and locked, and refuses to let you in because he doesn’t feel worthy to be in your presence!

Don’t come into my house, Jesus. I know how it works. I give orders all the time and they’re obeyed. Just give the order and my servant’s sickness will leave. Jesus turned to the crowd, those who were tagging along behind him. I imagine our Lord’s mouth dropping open in astonishment. This was totally unexpected. Jesus was completely blindsided by this act of faith from a Gentile Roman centurion, who could easily have ordered Jesus to enter and give honor and due respect in front of him.

And Jesus told the crowd, “Even in Israel, in the land God gave to the children of Abraham, I haven’t witnessed faith like this!” And the suffering servant was healed, without Jesus even giving the order, “Be healed.”

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, he had been calling people to believe, to have faith. “Believe that God’s Kingdom has come near to you. Trust that my way is the way to God.” But after all the teaching, preaching and healing, Jesus had to concede that he was astounded at having found more faith in the words of this Gentile army officer who supported the Roman occupation of Judea, than among his own followers.

I can’t help but wonder who was more disappointed that day. Was it Jesus’ disciples, after hearing their teacher announce to the whole classroom that in their Faith 101 class, they got a D-minus; or was it Jesus himself, for having to make that announcement and acknowledge the truth that his disciples were below average students who just weren’t getting it?

It was the outsider, the transfer student from away, on the very first day of class and who had never even opened a text book about faith, who showed them up in front of the teacher.

Sometimes, my friends, the church can fall into the dangerous trap of triumphalism.

Triumphalism simply means, “I’m better than you are.” It means, I know something you don’t know, and that makes me more special than you in God’s eyes.

Triumphalism is when the church celebrates itself, and begins to believe that it owns the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about God, about Jesus, about who’s worthy of forgiveness, and about who’s
going to be saved and who isn’t.

Triumphalism is me on the inside, looking at you on the outside and feeling proud and happy about that.

Do I even have to say that triumphalism has no place at all in the church of Jesus Christ? Triumphalism, the attitude of I’m better than you, my beliefs are true and come from God and yours don’t, that God loves me best, is, quite simply, anti-Christian.

Let me put it this way. All throughout the Gospels, Jesus made it crystal clear that he came, and he created the community we call the church, not for those on the inside, but for those on the outside.

Jesus, our Lord who came to us, who has gathered us here today, and who is going to come back for us one day, refuses to rest and be content with just us. There’s a whole world out there—billions of people—that God loves and whom God sent Jesus to save from perishing. Right now, in our view, those people are on the outside. But God wants them on the inside. And God calls us to help make that happen.

We’re in the season of Pentecost now, the season of the coming and the presence of God’s Holy Spirit. We invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit during our times of worship; but if you don’t care for outsiders, watch out. Because, you see, the Holy Spirit, through whom the risen Christ is present to us, flat out refuses to be confined or limited to us and to only people who are like us, physically, religiously, ideologically, or any other way.

Rather, the Spirit is like a wildfire, spreading through and burning out of control through the whole world. The very same world—and all the world’s people—that God loves so much and yearns so much to save that God sent His only Son so that the world might not perish, but might have Eternal Life.

So, let’s not be surprised or put off that our God of immeasurable love has opened up the gates of God’s Kingdom to any and all, even our enemies, who have enough faith say to Jesus, “Only say the word, and I will be healed.” Because God’s will is that every human being, including those we judge to be on the outside of God’s circle of love, looking in, will ultimately be drawn in and come to believe in the power of Jesus to heal them and make them well, just like the centurion believed. Thanks be to God. Amen.