

Ask anyone what “John 3:16” means and many will recall posters held up at sporting events, or large public gatherings by earnest folks who are perhaps nudging people who spot this poster to looking up what does it mean, anyway. And the implicit assumption is that the entire gospel and all the words in it can be summed up in that one verse – “for God so Loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”.

Well, it’s probably the most known and most preached about text in the Christian church. I am turning today to fresh sources, at least for me, to listen to some different voices than I am used to listening to.

Back in July, inspired by the movements to lift up and pay attention to the voices and wisdom of Black, Latinx and Indigenous people, a colleague of mine in Vancouver, Rev Helen Dunn, who is the Vicar of Christ Church Cathedral, committed herself to a year-long plan. She said “I am going to spend a year reading and using sources for my sermon preparation who are Black, Indigenous and Latinx scholars and theologians”. And – she went on to say “each month I am going to invite one of my colleagues across the country to do this with me” So, for this month of September, she invited me to participate in that journey with her to hear new voices (for me) and share them with you.

Going back to our text then, the interpretation of John 3:16 is very often an individualistic approach, and references a personal salvation. If I believe, I am saved. It is important to remember that ‘believe’ is not a thing you think. It is a thing you do. I can think it’s a good idea to eat lots of fruit and vegetables, or I can think “I will exercise more” but until I actually DO it, it doesn’t have any impact. I can think that compassion and mercy are good ways to live, but until I actually do those things, it is insufficient.

What I am discovering in consistently reading Black and Latinx scholars is that there is very little sense of ‘individualistic’ faith, belief, or action. Communities thrive together. It is not about individuals thriving or ‘being saved’. And, these theologies are deeply informed by the systems and structures of oppression that disproportionately affect their communities.

Samuel Cruz, a Latino professor of church and society at Union Theological Seminary asks “What does ‘believing in Jesus” mean? If indeed Jesus came to the world to save it from sin, what kind of sin? In the gospel, sin seems to be concrete, and structural (that is, injustice, hate, lack of mercy) rather than individualistic. Cruz says that God’s sending Jesus into the world is not about magically ‘fixing’ it. To

change the world or save it requires a process that ends hate, injustice, oppression and replaces it with justice, compassion, mercy, love, equality. Believing in Jesus has more to do with what people believe and do about hate, exploitation and injustice rather than an esoteric “religious” conversion. The key part of understanding this text is in the verses that follow immediately after this small section:

¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.”

As it happens, this also extends what Paul was speaking of in his sermon last week, where he talked about the work of the divine community towards restoration, reconciliation and resurrection. God is committed to our feeble, fragile and frail attempts of restoring and reconciling one another. Paul said in his sermon “That is what happens when we say that Black Lives Matter. That is what happens when we review our internal biases and realize how we have oppressed some and upheld others, or learn how we are damaging the planet, or listen to the stories of Indigenous Peoples. These are all part of the holy work of bearing the name of Jesus.

Coming up this fall, Paul and I are going to invite you to dive a little deeper into learning more about our beliefs and actions, and learn from different writers. We will be hosting some book studies, conversation groups and recommending some reading to you. Throughout the coming months, we will explore new ways to learn and grow together as a community of faith.