His real name is Rollen Stewart, but you might know him by Rock’N Rollen or The Rainbow Man. He was the white guy during the 1970s and ‘80s that you saw at major sporting events across the country wearing a rainbow afro wig. Oh, and holding up a sign in just the right (or wrong) position to photobomb a picture or video that read: JOHN 3:16.

Rollen was a deeply troubled man who lived off an inheritance until it was gone and then was funded by some rich Evangelical Christians. At first, he lived out of his car, smoking weed and trying to get attention as an actor and dancer. One night he watched a Bible prophecy TV show and decided God had called him to communicate the gospel message of that verse from the Bible to as many people as he could.

Rollen made it his life work to make himself a spectacle to save souls. Hard to know which was more important, the spectacle of self or the saving of souls.

Whatever Rock’N Rollen’s success in getting people to read John 3:16, it didn’t help his own mental health. He became more and more paranoid, and after a standoff with police in a Los Angeles hotel room, he ended up in prison for kidnapping. He remains incarcerated today, serving three consecutive life sentences. This certainly is not what the “shall not perish but have eternal life” part of John 3:16 should mean.¹

John 3:16 is probably the Bible’s most recognizable verse. In the King James Version that many of us learned as children, it reads: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

The unfortunate case of Rollen Stewart and others like him who use John 3:16 as a talisman and turn as many people off to Jesus as on to him shouldn’t make us

¹ https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/500515/unbelievable-life-john-316-sports-guy
run from this powerful verse. Martin Luther called it “the gospel in miniature.” It is packed with good news. Just look ...

God loves the world. Against ancient views of the gods who toyed with the world for their own pleasure and kept people in fear of their capricious anger that could undo humans at any moment, John 3:16 tells us unambiguously that this God’s disposition toward us is always and only love. God’s love is constant. We can depend upon the character of God being love in every and any circumstance.

What’s more, the world itself is not the cause of God’s love. The world, in John’s Gospel, is under the spell of sin. It doesn’t compel God’s love by its truth, goodness and beauty. God loves the world, and all of us in it, despite its sin. God’s love is self-directed. It’s God’s nature to love. Period.

Then this: the world doesn’t know God or recognize that it is perishing. And so, God sends God’s only Son—the beloved one through whom the world was made, the light that lives inside us all and that the darkness has never overcome. God gives the Son to live among us as one of us—God with us. By putting our faith in him, the sin-sickness that leads to death is replaced with eternal life through him.

All that is good news, the kind of news that has led many people to put their faith and trust in Jesus. It has given a new sense of life and has deeded peace to people the world over. This verse is a declaration of who God is, why Christ came and what we might do in response so that we might know the blessing of it.

Every text has a context, though. John 3:16 doesn’t just float in the air all on its own. To understand it fully, we need to look at what comes before and after it. That involves the context of the verses just before and after it, as well as the wider context of what was going on when John wrote it and what’s been going on since.

First, consider the verses immediately before verse 16. We often use the word so to mean so much, as if John 3:16 starts out For God loved the world so much that God gave the Son. But the Greek word translated so in this case is better understood as just so. That is, For God loved the world in this very way. And what way is that? In a way that we see in verses 14-15, which recounts a strange and wondrous story.
from Israel's history.

The people of God were complaining about the bitterness of their journey in the wilderness. God had provided manna and quail to eat, along with water from a rock to drink. Yet they were consumed with self-pity and turning their back on God’s mercy. God sent fiery serpents to nip at the feet and legs of the people, and many were perishing. But God willed that none should perish but all be saved. God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and fix it to a pole. Any and all who would lift their heads and gaze upon the image of what was killing them would be saved by it.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent on a pole in the wilderness so that all might be saved, so also the Son of Man must be lifted up on the cross so that all might be saved. That’s the background.

There’s a deep mystery about the nature of salvation. We have to face the thing that looks like death to us in order for it to become a source of life. Any therapist will tell you that ignoring or denying what has caused you pain will only cause you to perish. Looking at it with courage, though, takes the poison out and puts the cure in.

In this same way, the cross that was an instrument of torture and death became by the power of God, the source of eternal life for all who would look upon it with faith. What looks like perishing is actually the fount of life.

The verses after the verse continue this theme. *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.* The force of God’s actions in the wilderness and on the cross is the same: not that a remnant would be saved, but that all might be saved.

Whatever condemnation we experience due to our sin is self-imposed, since God did not hold our sin against us but sent the Son to lift it from us. We condemn ourselves; God saves us from our self-condemnation.

There’s another before and after to this verse. This before is captured in the story before our passage today when the religious leader Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night and cannot bring himself to accept the light he sees in Jesus.
In John’s Gospel, this story reflects the painful reality of expulsion of Jews who believe in Jesus from synagogue worship. John is assuring those who believe in Jesus and any who would put their faith in him that though they no longer have the support of the community of Israel, they have the support of the God of Israel.

The sharp contrast John draws is rooted in the rejection of those who believe in Jesus by those who don’t. It doesn’t begin with Jesus and his followers. John is constantly trying to show the cosmic nature of Christ, who draws all people to God. Christ is lifted up that all may be saved, not that some may be damned. John would not mean 3:16 to say the opposite or he would be guilty of the same spirit that caused the rift among God’s people. The rejected would then become the rejectors. And that’s not the gospel.

Which leads to the other after context of this verse today. This grand statement of God’s universal love for all has become in the hands of some Christians a way of dividing people against one another instead of uniting people to one another.

A Texas state representative just this week tweeted: *The true Gospel of Jesus is radically exclusive. #txlege*. Now, aside from the question of why a politician who is supposed to represent all his constituents regardless of their faith feels the need to be a twitter theologian, you have to wonder what his motivation is. It seems to be the spirit of Christian nationalism that sees only those who embrace John 3:16 the way he does as truly American—or Texan, don’t you know?!

Contrast that with the conversation in my house this week. Four of our grandchildren were visiting from San Antonio. The three girls were getting ready to go see their Nana for dinner, as Sharon Vickrey lives in Dallas, too. Three-year old, River Shannon, said he wanted to go. One of the girls said that Nana was their Nana, not his Nana, and he had to stay behind. River protested, *She’s my Nana, too*. To which, 10-year-old, Finley replied, *River, you’re so inclusive.*

Now, when you read John 3:16 today, I would urge you to do so in a way that you turn to Jesus as the one who saves you from perishing. But I would also urge
you to consider all those in the world—faithful Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists and Sikhs and others who are seeking to live in the light and do not love the darkness. All those who would say, Your God is my God, too. And think about this God of John 3:16 who so loves the whole world that none should perish.

Is the heart of the God of John 3:16 more exclusive or inclusive? Amen.