

PENTECOST 8 - Loving Each Other

1 John 3:16-24

Reading First John all the way through sounds more like a sermon than a letter. Today's passage in First John is the central summons of this epistle that calls its recipients to unity as a new covenant community, despite social, cultural, and mainstream distinctions or challenges. And the community of early Christians hearing these words preached to them seems to have been one in need of some encouragement. As you heard last week, it does appear that there was something of a church-split happening in the community, a community that was already perhaps feeling a bit precarious in a Roman Empire that was not thrilled with their proclamation of faith in a crucified (and risen) Saviour. Calling this time the "last hour", the author describes an unidentified "they" who have "gone out" from the community, and thus left behind the other disciples over differing interpretations of Jesus' identity and necessity for their connection to God.

While all this might seem extraneous to our passage, it is actually quite crucial. This conflict, whatever its unrecoverable particulars may be, sets the stage for the admonition and encouragement in First John. The "left behind" Christians in the Johannine community were wrestling with issues of identity: how could they tell whom to trust?

Those disciples who left probably seemed convinced of their own teachings even if the preacher calls them "antichrists!" In the middle of this controversy and uncertainty, the preacher of First John affirms that he and his audience in the community are the "children of God". As was read last week, he writes, "Behold what kind of love the Father has given to us that we should be called children of God, and we are!" He seeks to encourage them, not only of their own identity as God's children — and thus as ones connected to God's love, light, and life — but also of their knowledge, which comes from their divine connection.

The sermon is structured around three appeals to a community in crisis, where the author or preacher calls for unity through the axia that God is light, that God is just, and that God is love. In this passage from First John, the author expounds upon the justness of God by reiterating the form and content of the new covenant community narrated in the Gospel of John.

A determining factor for interpreting the Johannine Epistles is their historical relationship to the Gospel of John and the community that produced it. The sermon is best understood as arising from the community after the crisis with post-war Judaism and focussing upon the life and belief of the community itself early in the second century. The Gospel was likely written circa 80-100 CE in a community defining itself in the Greco-Roman world that includes the mainstream Judaism of the past. The sermon then comes from the following decade, in a community of churches that now finds it necessary to define itself against turmoil **from within**.

Christian ideals are proving difficult to live out in the larger Greco-Roman world that maintains a variety of beliefs and standards. Writing from an authoritative position, the author seeks to stem the tide of discord and dissolution and strengthen and unify his communities.

In First John the “knowledge” the believers have comes through Jesus, who is the revelation of God’s life, love, and will for the world. Jesus, the Unique One and the only one called God’s “Son”, reveals to the world God’s love by living the way God desires: namely, by loving others “to completion” or “to perfection” in his decision to “lay down his life” on behalf of others.

Of course, this laying down is not the whole story. As Jesus tells the crowd gathered around him in John’s Gospel, he lays down his life so that he can take it up again. The laying down of his life is not the end, but only part of his glorification that demonstrates the victory of Life over death, as well as God’s gift of life to all who receive it. When disciples truly receive, believe, and love, they imitate the example of Jesus, God’s Son, as they live out their own lives

as God's children.

Our preacher continues his encouragement by reminding the children of God how their identity should be revealed in their own daily lives. In contrast to the "children of the devil", described with the vivid example of Cain and his "slaying" of his "brother", Abel. God's children should live like his Son, not slaying, but "laying down" their lives "on behalf of" [their] siblings.

Since they should be willing to die for one another, they should also freely help one another when siblings are in need; they should give from their livelihood as well as from their lives to help a sibling in need. Paying lip-service to love is not enough; after all, the preacher has already said that the one whose actions do not match their words is a liar, is in the darkness still, and does not have God's word (that is, life) in them.

In contrast to hating, the act of loving (*agapao*) is intrinsic to the Gospel message and promotes the spiritual, communal, and physical thriving of our siblings. To love "in truth and action" is to care for the earthly well-being of every member of the church. "But whoever has the world's possessions and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses to help, how can the love of God reside in such a person?" "Whoever has the world's possessions" refers to those who have enough to live on and are not in material need. While the preacher here does not explicitly mention "the poor", he associates God's love with the community's care for the materially deprived among them.

The one who lacks materially is not some abstract "other", but a fellow believer, whom we are to regard as a sibling. Do we pay attention to how our siblings are doing? Is our Christian fellowship thick enough that we can share honestly about our needs? Are we relationally invested enough in the community to take turns carrying one another's burdens and doing whatever we can to alleviate our siblings' hardships?

A pastor who lived modestly but was in the habit of giving generously, was once asked how he determined the amount he gave to a relief agency his church partnered with, and to a missionary the church sponsored. He answered, “I give until it hurts.”

We can easily gift others with our “thoughts” because, if we’re honest, they cost us little. But love expressed through thoughtful financial support and sustained attention to the causes of material lack and physical suffering costs us much more. The preacher seems to anticipate the reluctance to love in sacrificial ways, which is why he gives the affectionate but clear directive, “My dear children, let’s not just talk about love; let’s practice real love.”

Real love is not only manifested in action but rooted in truth. It benefits not only those who receive it but also those who practice it, because it helps us know that we belong to or “are from the truth”. Although the preacher is not saying that our belonging to God depends on our love for God and others, he implies that our acts of love are born out of our life in Christ. Just as everyone knows Jesus’ disciples by their love for one another, so we Christians know that we are living in the truth by our actions. Actions that emulate Jesus’ sacrificial love reassure us that Christ abides in us and that his Spirit is at work in us.

But, believers may still struggle with the question “Is my love real or good enough?” or “Do I belong to God and the community of saints if I struggle to love others as God loves me?” The preacher offers the assurance that God “is greater than our hearts, and God knows everything.” By this he means that God’s unfathomable greatness, perfect wisdom, and abiding love serve as the basis for our relationship with him and others. Even when our best intentions run out and our best efforts to love fall flat, Christ’s inexhaustible love remains our source. Christ puts us in right standing with God, and this unshakable truth emboldens us to pray to God freely and persist in our practice of real love, even if it hurts.

Indeed, the preacher continues, these actions: the daily loving of siblings in the community through care, compassion, and giving that demonstrate one's "words and speech" with "work and truth", once again confirm the children of God in their identity, even when their own hearts might wonder. "In this we know that we are from the truth and before Him [God] we persuade our hearts, if our hearts should condemn us, that God is greater than our hearts and He knows all things."

In other words, not only do the actions of others reveal their identities; are they "children of God" or "children of the devil", but our own actions are also revelatory. They unmask our own identities to others and to ourselves, and they can give us the confidence we, when left on our own, may lack. When we love our siblings, we show everyone and reaffirm, even to ourselves, that we are "children of God".

The encouragement continues in First John: knowing our identity as God's children gives us "confidence" or "boldness" to approach God to ask for help, assured that we will not be shamed. This confidence comes from the unity, or abiding, that exists between Jesus the Son, God himself, and God's children who have received God's Spirit. Repeatedly the preacher reminds the children of their "abiding", mimicking language of Jesus himself from the Gospel of John.

The children, as ones abiding in God, that is, remaining united with God by believing and imitating his Son, will ask and receive in accord with God's will; it cannot be otherwise. Like Jesus, these children are assured that their Father hears them because they are united with him by means of the Son and the Spirit. Even though others may have "gone out", the preacher encourages his siblings to "remain", to "abide", since it is only by being connected to God that one experiences eternal life.

According to the Venerable Bede, "In truth it is impossible to love one another in the right way if we do not have faith in Christ, just as it is

impossible to believe in the name of Christ if we do not love one another.”

Some of you may have been following the American election campaigns. It was surprising to discover that everyone has to declare a party affiliation which becomes part of their identity. If you look at an address or phone listing you will be surprised to find the listing has everyone’s party affiliation next to their name. Whatever happened to the secret ballot?

Just before the 2012 presidential election, CNN posted to its website an interesting quiz: “Do you believe in a red state Jesus or a blue state Jesus?” You could answer a series of questions about how you read the Gospels and understand the message and meaning of Jesus and, by the nature of your answers, the quiz would tell you whether you believe in a Jesus who is a supporter of American Democratic values or American Republican values.

One feature of the quiz’s profiling is that the “red” (Republican) Jesus can be summed up in terms of John’s Gospel: Jesus came to bring salvation to those who believe; the “blue” (Democrat) Jesus is summed up in Matthew’s Gospel: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Which is right? Well, the quiz (probably not to the surprise of its creators) is flawed by forcing you to choose seemingly mutually exclusive options. Was Jesus all about faith, or all about love? The gospel tradition obviously bears witness to the essential importance of both! And these twin convictions (the primacy of faith, and the primary of love) are both deeply embedded in the Johannine tradition.

While there is no way to be certain, many scholars suggest that First John is a text that provides clarifications in view of possible or even actual misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the Fourth Gospel. (In that sense, it would have been the first commentary on the Gospel of John!) If this is accurate, one could see First John’s “And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us” as a way of ensuring that two main threads

(faith in Christ, mutuality of love) of the Fourth-Gospel garment are interwoven. For good reason, the Gospel of John is known as the “Gospel of Faith”. Faith language appears over 100 times in the book! But “love” is, no doubt, also a leitmotif of the gospel, as becomes especially apparent in the frequency of the word *agape* in the famous very long Farewell Discourse of John’s Gospel.

Unfortunately, there have been trends and crosscurrents of debate and division that have led to a problematic branching, or split, that can easily become distorted into a “faith vs. works” mentality. Twentieth century Reformed theologian, G.C. Berkouwer, helpfully articulates a more excellent way forward by modelling First John’s commandment, bringing faith and love together, rather than standing by an inaccurate understanding of *sola fide* (faith alone). Berkouwer writes, especially clarifying Luther’s thought:

Faith is not a competitor of love and good works but rather a sponsor, and gives foundation to them because it acknowledges the grace of God. Again and again, and for this reason, Luther pointed out the deep significance of the first commandment [“no other gods”] and accounted all works performed outside its sphere as nothing.

Berkouwer goes on to explain how Luther saw the move from faith to loving one’s neighbour: “all one’s works must promote the welfare of one’s neighbour, since in his faith each has all the possession he requires and can therefore freely and lovingly devote his entire life to the service of his neighbour.”

This kind of perspective seems to be reinforced by the way the author frames his statement in First John: believing in Jesus and loving one another are not represented as two separate commandments, but rather as one command. What God has joined together, let no one put asunder! Learning obedience to the fullness of both Christ-believing and people-loving is what it means to abide in Jesus, to have a vital connection to the source of all eternal and true

life and joy through the Spirit.

“And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.”

Amen.

PENTECOST PRAYERS FOR JULY 14, 2024

Loving God, bring stillness to our hearts, empty our minds of other things and direct our thoughts to those who especially need our prayers.

When we reflect on how you have supported and cared for us in the past, we cannot fail to give you thanks. When we consider the ways in which you give us courage and help for each new day, we are filled with a sense of gratitude and praise. When you lift us from the pit of doubt and despair, our whole being feels renewed and refreshed. What a comfort it is, to know the love and support you bring to us through your Son and by your Holy Spirit.

In our joy, let us not forget those who know little else but sadness. In our sense of gratitude and praise, let us not forget those whose lives are filled with regrets and heartbreaks. In our feeling of support and guidance, let us not forget those who feel they have struggled against life's difficulties and disappointments alone and uncared for. Stir in us compassion and caring for others.

Heavenly Father, you are not only the God of this world, you are the benevolent ruler of your heavenly Kingdom. Strengthen us while we live out our life on this earth, show the compassion and the caring of Jesus. Hold before us the reality of your Kingdom, where there is no suffering, pain or regret, so that we may share it with those who have lost hope, who fear the future they imagine, or who do not yet know you.

God of the poor and sick, you are most profoundly present in situations of need, of lack, of pain and distress. We pray for those who are ill, recovering from surgery or awaiting medical procedures and surgeries. We pray for Michelle and Fred Hoenisch, Pastor Kristen Steele and Bishop Kathy. We lift up the situations and names of those whom we name aloud or in the silence of our hearts. (...) Surround them with your healing presence.

Give us eyes to see and ears to hear the wonders of your miraculous Creation. Inspire in us awe and appreciation for each breath we take, for each heartbeat that sustains life, for every tiny insect, every budding blossom, the bounty of fresh fruits and vegetables, every towering tree, every beautiful sunset.

God of power and might, we pray that you intervene in the hearts and minds of world leaders. World leaders are scrambling to negotiate peace and yet the bridges of trust are broken repeatedly. Reconcile all warring tribes and nations, especially Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, and tear down the walls that divide us, that the peace of Christ may bring harmony and accord to all.

We pray for all who are impacted by hurricanes, floods and fires and are having to evacuate their communities; for those helping them in their distress; for the firefighters and emergency responders; protect them all and give them strength and resilience as they respond to these disasters.

We pray for our church and its leaders: Bishop Kathy and Bishop Susan, Anna, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers. We pray for Hills of Peace Lutheran in Kamloops - Rev. Jane Gingrich; our Global Mission Companion, the Evangelical Lutheran Church – Peru (IL-P), President Ofelia Davila; the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara; the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land.

Gracious God, in the midst of all that concerns us, in the situations that require our time and attention, grant us also opportunities for life-nourishing rest, relaxation and reflection to spend enjoying being in your presence, to be still and to listen to all you wish to share with us.

We offer these prayers trusting that you hear and will respond according to your holy purposes. In the name of the patient, insightful, and healing Christ who taught us to pray

Our Father ...