

PENTECOST 10 SERMON

1John 5:1-13

The community to whom 1 John was written was facing a crisis. Former members of the community were denying that Jesus was truly the Messiah, God's flesh and blood, fully human, son. Like many churches facing doctrinal conflict, 1 John's community seems to have been confused, afraid, and unsure what to do. Whom should they believe? How could they know what was true, and what was not? How should they react?

1 John's simple, confident response is as relevant today as it was when the letter was first written: You know who you are, you know whose you are, and you know what you have been told from the beginning. God's own Spirit shows us what is true. There's no need to panic or argue. Instead, focus on living your faith. God has the whole situation under control.

1 John reminds the community that everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah — the anointed Son of God — has been born of God. They have no reason to be afraid, for they belong to God. As God's children, they can rest assured that they are loved and protected by their divine parent.

We know when people are children of God by the way they entrust themselves to Jesus as the Christ, and love God's other children. Our belief that Jesus is the Christ joins us inextricably with those who share the same christological convictions, and entrust themselves to Jesus. So, what binds and unifies believers is our shared confession, not our shared affection.

Our shared love for God forges us into a cruciform fellowship that affirms the spiritual impact and also the human, physical, and fleshly reality of Christ's death and resurrection. This means that our love for fellow believers does not depend on our natural affinities, racial-ethnic background, cultural heritage, shared histories, interests, political views, or bonds of affection, but is based on our status as children of God.

If we love God, then naturally we will love anyone born of God. After all, how can one love a parent without loving the child whom the parent brought into being? The child of God referred to in 1 John is first and foremost Jesus, as well as any child of God. Jesus is born of God, but everyone who believes in him becomes his brother or sister. Whoever loves the parent loves not just one of the parent's children but all of them. The consequences of this conclusion are enormous: every child of God is linked to Jesus. Every injustice done to a child of God echoes the injustice done to Jesus. Every act of violence committed against a child of God recalls the violence committed against Jesus.

Loving God, loving God's children, and keeping God's commandments form inseparable links in a circular chain. In its depiction of this interwoven reality, 1 John echoes Jesus' conversation with his disciples on the night before his death: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments"; "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them"; "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you".

The author does not assume that children of God instinctively know how to love God and fellow believers. He is aware that we are capable of inflicting harm and pain on each other. So he assures us that we can know that we love God and his children through our obedience to God's commandments.

Obedience in the form of commandment-keeping or, more specifically, loving fellow children of God, communicates and confirms our love for God. Although our status as God's children remains secure because of God's prior and perfect love for us, the practice of loving others demands a dogged commitment. We are to care for our brothers and sisters in need and remain firm in our genuine faith in Jesus Christ without being led astray.

1 John reminds us that God's commands are not burdensome. Again we are reminded of Jesus, who denounces the religious leaders for loading people down with "heavy burdens hard to bear". By contrast, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens ... For my yoke is easy, and my

burden is light.” Like Jesus, 1 John insists that God’s commands are not difficult. In essence, they consist in the call to love, “not in word or speech, but in truth and action”. Genuine faith, therefore, is firmly connected with active love.

Those with true faith also confess that Jesus is the Son of God. For 1 John, confessing that Jesus is the Son of God means believing that Jesus is the one who came through water and blood. The verse goes on to specify, “not in water only, but in water and in blood”. Scholars argue about the precise meaning of this phrase. Some suggest that it refers to the blood and water that came out of Jesus’ pierced side after his crucifixion. Others see it as referring to the water in which Jesus was baptized and the blood that flowed from him during his crucifixion, or as encompassing his whole life from the breaking of his mother’s bag of water to his bloody death.

Whatever the precise meaning of the phrase, its basic point is clear: Jesus did not simply appear to be human. He was truly flesh and blood. Nor was he God’s Son only during his baptism and ministry. The fact that he was God’s Son did not mean that Jesus somehow escaped the full consequences of being human. He shared the whole human experience of living and dying. He remained God’s Son even in his agonizing death by torture on the cross. Jesus was born, baptized, and crucified to empower all of us to become God’s children, cleansed by his blood. This is not some inessential doctrinal point. This is the heart of our faith.

Christian faith conquers the world not by military might or doctrinal arguments or coercion, but by love. Christians believe in the Son of God who, rather than shedding the blood of others to prove that he was the Messiah, allowed his own blood to be shed. God’s children triumph not by inflicting suffering on others or by avoiding pain at all costs but by allowing God to work within and through them even in their suffering.

What applies to individual Christians applies also to the Christian community. The Church triumphs over false teaching not by force or argument, but because of and through the suffering love of the crucified Messiah. This is the truth to which the Holy Spirit testifies: God’s son was tortured and broken for us. This is the faith that overcomes the world: God’s love brings life even out of brokenness and death.

This is the victory to which we are called: loving God's children, and thus living our faith in the crucified, risen Son of God.

Belief in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God must not be reduced to intellectual consent to christological ideas and verbal confessions of the creeds. Faith has power. Faith confirms our identity as God's children and forges our familial bonds. Faith enables us to love one another and prevail over the forces that defy God and distort God's love. It is through our commitment to our shared faith and love for one another that we love the parent and give God pleasure.

In order to make full sense of this chapter, we should notice the frequent use of testimonial language. The author treats the truth of Jesus as if it is on trial and he must make his case and invite the proper witnesses. The theme of witness is central to John's Gospel. At the beginning of the Gospel, John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus. Jesus bears witness to himself and the Father bears witness to him. The beloved disciple bears witness to the events of crucifixion and resurrection. After Jesus' death and return to the Father, the Paraclete will bear witness to the truth of the gospel.

The testimony of the apostles teaches us that the cross was the climax of Jesus' obedience to God the Father and his full love for the world. While his sacrifice was pervasively labelled as shame and degradation by the world, when God raised Jesus up from the realm of the dead, He placed His own stamp of approval on Jesus' gift of his life. The resurrection does not replace the cross of Christ, it shines a spotlight on the cross to broadcast the victory of God to the world.

The way in which believers lay claim to their part in this personal relationship is through faith. Often in the New Testament, "faith" is primarily a matter of trust or commitment. But in John's Gospel and in this epistle, faith is primarily a matter of "belief". However, it is not so much "belief that" as it is "belief in", belief in Jesus as God's own Son.

"Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts ... I write these things to you, who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" echoes John's Gospel: "These things are written

so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

In our time, we appropriately rejoice in the gifts of an inclusive church and an open table. And yet, this epistle, like John’s Gospel, reminds us that right belief does matter for full life. The wobbly Christology of John’s opponents, — a phantom-like Jesus barely concealing an ethereal godhead, wobbles for our time, too. Full faith demands full flesh and full incarnation. Otherwise what is redeemed is only some phantasmal us.

In John’s Gospel and in this epistle, eternal life does not refer exclusively to life beyond the grave. Eternal life is full life, now and in the world to come. When the epistle says that those who “believe in the name of the Son of God may know that they have eternal life”, does not mean that the faithful believe now and have eternal life later. Those who believe know that they have eternal life because the belief, the faith, is itself eternal life, real life.

Today, it is not as common to hear Christians deny the humanity of Jesus, or to scorn his death. But problems with a similar misunderstanding of the way of Jesus appear in every generation. To give a recent example, in April of 2014, a woman in North Carolina called the police having noticed a homeless man sleeping on a bench outside of a church that she drives by on the way home from work. The woman and the police discovered that this “homeless man” was actually a statue of a humble Jesus, commissioned by the church and sculpted by Catholic artist Timothy Schmalz.

The woman was scandalized by this statue, finding it an offensive portrayal of Jesus: “Jesus is not a vagrant, Jesus is not a helpless person who needs our help”, she told reporters. She didn’t understand the symbolism or the message. This statue represented the real-life Jesus, the one we find in the Gospels. This woman’s voice has echoed through the ages as someone who wants to claim a supernatural Jesus to the exclusion of the man of the cross. His own did not receive him. He needed help from others. He had no place to lay his head. His lifeless body was taken down from the cross. He was crucified in weakness, like a homeless man on a park bench, looking for God’s love.

Our series on 1 John ends with another text that has strong ties to the Gospel of John through testimony. In a debate with the authorities in the Gospel of John, Jesus makes the case that he has on his side human testimony (John the Baptist), divine testimony (God the Father), the self-evident testimony of his own works and the testimony of Scripture.

Jesus employs a legal metaphor here, making the point that all of these witnesses would be accepted as trustworthy in adjudicating a religious dispute. 1 John picks up on this theme, arguing that since his readers accept human testimony in court, they should even more readily accept the testimony of God regarding his Son.

Having dealt with the problem of sin and exhorted the community to love one another, the author of 1 John brings his letter to a close by emphasizing the gift of eternal life that Jesus brings. He ends with the confidence that those who receive his letter are believers in the Son of God and he reminds them that this belief, in spite of their sin and their love, is what leads to eternal life.

Amen.

PRAYERS at GLC for JULY 28, 2024

Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, and for all people according to their needs.

O God of power, we pray for your church on earth, that the troubles and worries of this world may not deter us from our primary mission, which is to proclaim Your love and mercy and to make disciples of Jesus. Strengthen our faith in You and in Your power to guide Your church and all of its members. We pray that You would deliver us from evil and bless us with renewed hope. Bless Your whole church on earth with the joy of Your presence.

O God of power, bless the leaders of Christ's church on earth. Bless especially the Reverend Kathy Martin, Bishop of our BC Synod; the Reverend Susan Johnson, Bishop of our national Lutheran Church, the ELCIC; the Reverend Anna Greenwood-Lee, Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of B.C; and the Reverend Linda Nicholls, Primate of the Anglican Church of Canada. Give them faith and courage. Bless also all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers. Bless them with love and hope and hearts full of joy.

O God of power, we pray for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, as they minister to their warring neighbours. We pray for our sister congregation in Peru, San Juan Camino de Esperanza and their pastor, Ana Maria Jara. And today especially we lift up Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church in Langley and their pastor, Kristen Steele, and St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Vancouver and their pastor, Rev. Ingrid Cramer-Doerschel, who conducts services in English and German.

O God of power, in these days of human-caused climate-change, bless those farmers and agricultural businesses who employ organic and soil-renewing methods and biological pest control. Bless those fishermen and women who use non-polluting methods such as lead-free tackle, and who refrain from throwing their garbage overboard. Bless those lumber companies who use sustainable forest practices and consider the future of the forests after their harvest. We pray that more and more of us consumers may be filled with Your Holy Spirit and be willing to make sacrifices to sustain Your beautiful and life-giving creation.

Ruler of all, we ask that You guide and bless our political leaders at the national, provincial, and local levels. Bless them with sharp minds and generous hearts, with honesty and a desire for the welfare of all their constituents, rich and poor, young and old, male and female equally, so that, not only may justice be done, but justice may be trumped with mercy and kindness when needed. We pray

especially for nations where there is war or violence or internal conflict, that Your Holy Spirit of justice and love may fill their hearts and inspire them to kindness and guide them in the way of peace.

O God of grace, mercy and forgiveness, ease the suffering of those who are lonely, or are without a safe dwelling or a caring family. Have mercy on those who are broken-hearted or depressed. Bless them with friends and with people who will care for them and will be kind to them. Move us to share from our abundance, whether of time or talents or advocacy or financial aid. Ease their suffering and bless them with signs of your presence and love, and help them to find faith and hope in the blessed future You have in store.

Healing God, bless all who are suffering from poor health or serious illness. Bless their bless doctors and nurses, and all who are, for them, agents of healing and grace. We pray for the sick and grieving whom we name before You now, either aloud or in the silence of our hearts ... We pray especially for Pastor Kristin Steele and Bishop Kathy as they recovery from their surgeries; that healing and comfort may come to them.

Eternal God, we give thanks to You for our spiritual ancestors, and for those of our family or church who blazed our path to faith. We give You thanks for all the saints and martyrs of the past, whose witness and proclamation inspire us and strengthen our faith still today. Comfort us with Your promise of a heavenly life after death, and grant us the faith and certainty that You will bring us into Your eternal Kingdom peace and joy.

These prayers, and any others on our minds this morning, we lift up to You, trusting that You will hear us and answer us according to Your loving will. In Christ's name we pray ...

Amen.

Let us continue to pray as Jesus taught ...

Our Father ...