

**The First Letter of John
Bruce Davis
St. Andrew's United Methodist Church
Omaha, Nebraska
April 21 & 22, 2018**

We spent the season of Lent preaching and singing our way through the Gospel According to John. This was the culmination of a four year Lenten preaching project that started with Matthew in 2015, Mark in '16, Luke last year. As of Easter 2018 and the musical epic, "All You Need Is Love"-- John's resurrection account set to the songs of the Beatles--it is finished, my own self not far behind.

Tradition has it that John was the youngest of Jesus' varsity disciples, the only one of the group to reach old age--the others having been martyred along the way. Not that John had it cushy. In his advanced years, he was exiled to an island off the coast of Asia Minor, where he had a series of visions/Revelations. A couple of years ago, we spent a season with the Book of Revelation, aka: The Revelation to John.

In addition to his gospel account in the front of the New Testament, and the end time visions of the last book of the Bible, Big John is credited with three pastoral letters/epistles, headed in my Bible, appropriately enough: The First Letter of John, The Second Letter of John, The Third Letter of John. Per the preface to the New Revised Standard Version, 1 John is a sermon, 2 John a letter to a congregation, 3 John written to an individual.

On multiple occasions in the Lenten series, we referenced beloved words from the first of these three letters, chapter 4, verses 7 & 8.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

John is reinforcing a theme prominent in his gospel account. You likely know this verse, Gospel of John chapter 3, verse 16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life.”

Likewise, in this first of the three New Testament letters, John affirms: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” That’s 1 John chapter 4, verse 8; this is verse 19: “We love because God first loved us.”

The Monotones once inquired:

*I wonder, wonder, wonder, wonder who
Who wrote the book of love?*

*Tell me, tell me, tell me
Who wrote the book of love?
I’ve got to know the answer
Was it someone from above*

*I wonder, wonder, wonder, wonder who
Who wrote the book of love?*

Who wrote the Book of Love? Was it someone from above? Yes, says John; John himself acting as scribe, the author being God.

However, at the risk of contradicting my own Easter message, it should not necessarily be assumed John is saying love is *all* you need. With that, let’s dig into the epistles of John, starting at the first letter, first chapter, first verse:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard and what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—

Stop. We're still in the first sentence, but pause to note: John wants the reader to know he is speaking from personal experience. As said earlier, he'd been a part of the original apostolic team, John and his brother James called by Jesus "Sons of Thunder."

John had been with Jesus from the Sea of Galilee to the cross, now witnessing to things seen and heard first-hand. As we shall see, this becomes particularly important in refuting ideas being promoted by others who, as John sees it, just don't know what they're talking about.

The opening verses of this pastoral letter echo the opening verses of John's gospel: Chapter one, verse one, the Gospel According to John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being through him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

Hold this for later:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

So, put what was read earlier back up on the screen. John reiterates: The Word that in the beginning spoke creation into being has been revealed in flesh and blood, in person of Jesus of Nazareth. Having interrupted in mid-sentence, we continue....

We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you may also have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

John would surely approve of this congregation's mission statement, etched in stone above us: To Share The Gospel of Jesus Christ. I hope you understand the evangelical implications. John is sharing what he's seen and heard with the intention of inviting others into Christian fellowship. You've often hear me say, as we greet new members at St. Andrew's, every person added to this fellowship increases our joy. There will likely be people here this weekend looking for a church home. We would invite you into the fellowship, that our joy may be more complete.

I'll hear people say they don't need the fellowship of the church. They can worship God by their lonesome, in the beauty of nature, or wherever. May be. I don't know. What I know is this: The New Testament is all about the fellowship of believers. And here's the thing, whether or not you think you need the fellowship, the fellowship needs you. Your engaged presence is itself a witness of sorts, encouraging others.

I don't mind saying, your engaged presence has encouraged me. A song from the Beatles repertoire not heard on Easter, "Eleanor Rigby," with the lament, "Father McKenzie, writing a sermon that no one will hear."

These are strange days to be in parish ministry, church and culture having gone through tectonic shifts over the four decades I've been in ministry. I have a colleague who says most every pastor he knows suffers from at least a low level of depression. Your engaged presence has encouraged me to get up early every morning and pour myself into these messages, believing that someone—maybe not you, but someone—will be blessed by these labors of love. And, maybe, at least occasionally, one of those "someones" will be you.

Back to the first letter of John:

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie, and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

If I ever write my memoirs, I'll surely include a chapter about my experience with music directors. Kristin and Pam will come off fine, right up there with Kathleen Thomerson of University Church in St. Louis, Missouri. Kathleen was a classically trained organist, taking a month off each summer to play in European cathedrals. Given that I can't read a note of music, but was no less prone to meddle in the music ministry then than I am now, you can imagine Kathleen and I had some adventures. She didn't yell at me too often.

Kathleen and I were co-existing at University Church when the "new" United Methodist Hymnal was published in 1989, featuring a Kathleen Thomerson hymn:

*I want to walk as a child of the light
I want to follow Jesus
God set the stars to give light to the world
The star of my life is Jesus*

*In him there is no darkness at all
The night and the day are all alike
The lamb is the light of the city of God
Shine in my heart Lord Jesus.*

Kathleen's hymn is infused with images from the literature of John, including, "The lamb is the light of the city of God," ripped from the pages of Revelation; and 1 John chapter 1, verse 5: "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all."

And this is verse 6:

"If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true."

'Twould seem John is concerned that some who claim to be in the light are really walking in darkness.

With that, let's go the second of the letters of John, addressed to "the elect lady and her children." The salutation is open to interpretation. In the Lenten series, we talked about John's gospel as having a discernably feminist slant. It occurs to me the "elect lady" to whom this letter is addressed may have been a woman giving leadership to a congregation, "her children" being the congregants.

Again, in this second epistle, we see familiar themes. John is overjoyed to hear that "some" of the elect lady's children are walking in the truth. Again, there is an exhortation, "Let us love one another." That said, borrowing from old-time rock and roll, love is "more than a feeling." Verse 6: "And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments."

Yes, "some" of the lady's children are walking in the truth, but others seem to have been led off the truth track:

Reader: Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.

What was it we read earlier from John's gospel account?

Reader: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Ideas matter. John is speaking to an idea that had spread like a virus in the congregations: Gnosticism. Gnostics held that human flesh is itself inherently sinful; therefore the Son of God couldn't have actually been of flesh and bone. He may have appeared as a man, but appearances can be deceiving; per the Gnostic heresy Jesus was a purely spiritual being.

John is not alone in insisting that the Word in fact became flesh. We read in Hebrews chapter 2:

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things... Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect... Because he himself was

tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

This is not small matter, folks. I grew up with a decidedly gnostic idea of Jesus, even if I didn't know the word, seeing him go to the cross with a wink and smile, "I got this guys." If Jesus knew the game was fixed from the beginning, how could he relate to my issues?

It was a revelation to open the book and read of him sweating blood in Gethsemane, asking the Heavenly Father to take the cup of death from his lips, praying, nevertheless, "Not my will, but thine be done"; and then, from the cross, "Why have you forsaken me."

The Gnostics dismissed such as play-acting, for the sake of his audience. To which John, who was there, says "Liars." I wasn't there, but can testify to this: In times when I've felt lost, the idea that Jesus might be able to identify, up close and personal, has been a very present help. And, per the Biblical promise, he has helped me, his grace sufficient to my needs—and there have been a whole lot of needs!

Turning 180 degrees: In our time, there are many who advance an idea exactly opposite the Gnostics: Jesus was flesh and blood, alright, a good man who died young, and we should adhere to his teachings, but as to the "God" part, nah.... As for me, if Jesus is just another guy, however good, well, I know a lot of good guys, and gals, and I'll look to somebody who doesn't wear sandals. So, what are we to think?

A little church history won't hurt us: In the 4th century, circa 325, Roman Emperor Constantine was himself converted to Christianity. Having thrown in with the Jesus people, Constantine called church leaders together to clarify exactly what it was he was supposed to believe. Out of what is remembered as the Council of Nicea came an affirmation entirely supported by the New Testament: Jesus is fully God and fully Man--100% both and. Sure, it's a mystery, one in which I delight. I am convinced that faith is most authentically lived out in the tension of flesh and spirit, both Christ's and our own.

Back to the Gnostics. The word comes from “gnosis,” as in knowledge. The Gnostics fancied themselves as more spiritually advanced/enlightened than the common rabble in so many congregations. Such elitism seems to have troubled John a lot.

In the third letter, he points specifically to a dude named Diotrephes, “who likes to put himself first,” and “does not acknowledge our authority.” Furthermore, Diotrephes seems to have been trying to build himself up by tearing John down. The same thing happened to the apostle Paul in some of the churches he had started, people being all nicey-nice so long as he was around, dissing him when was gone.

I’ll soon be gone myself. I’m telling the staff, as the congregation runs into issues—and change always brings issues--don’t be shy about blaming me. I’ll be a thousand-plus miles away. That said, I’ve been thinking on this Diotrephes. Never ever underestimate the damage that can be done by one malcontent in the church, who in turn gathers others. John’s remedy: “Do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good.”

In this season of change and transition, I invite you to be mindful of what you can do to build up this fellowship. To borrow from yet another song, “The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not the pastor (okay, I’m taking some liberty with the lyric), the church is the people.” A lot of what happens next at St. Andrew’s will have less to do with my designated successor, Dr. Emmert/Bruce 2.0, than with you...

Back to the first letter of John, still in chapter 1, now at verse 8:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Again, there are multiple interpretations. Given the context, it

seems likely that John was concerned about another misbegotten idea in circulation in the churches, that being: If I've been freed from sin, whee, I can do whatever I want to do.

The apostle to the Gentiles, Paul of Tarsus, speaks specifically to this in his letter to the Galatians, chapter 5:

For you were called freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence....

I've been reading a wonderful book, "While God Is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers." Author Stephen Woodworth writes of 19th century "Spiritists":

Spiritists claimed that mere bonds of marriage need not restrain their activities, and they claimed the 'right' to have physical relationship with anyone for whom they conceived a 'spiritual affinity.' Not surprisingly, they had a great many 'spiritual affinities.'

Of course, mainline Protestants of our era don't much like to talk about sin in the first place. Maybe we're making some poor choices and need a little help. When I was seminary, it felt like they spent more time teaching us to be therapists than evangelists. And, really, doesn't the S-word—and I'm talking sin friends—come across as judgmental in and of itself?

Which is likely just swell with the devil. I'm just reporting, folks. You and I may not take Satan seriously, but old John did:

Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.

Never underestimate the one who has been sinning from the beginning.

This is Christianity 101, Paul's letter to the church in Rome, chapter three, verse 23, "We have all sinned and fallen short of the

glory of God.” John shares the remedy, **“If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** But how are we to confess our sin if we have deceived ourselves we have no sin to confess?

I have a long-standing appreciation for the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, #4 in particular, “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” Allow me to inquire: When’s the last time you did inventory?

John continues:

“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. (BRD: Including the sin of claiming we have no sin!) But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the world. Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments.

Any moral inventory starts with measuring ourselves against the commandments. There are ten of them, you know...

Whoever says, ‘I have come to know him,; but does not obey his commandment is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection.’

Perfection? Please indulge a most imperfect soul to talk about that. Among the many intriguing ideas of the original Methodist, John Wesley, was the doctrine of Christian Perfection.

At one point in my life, I sort of imaged salvation working this way: Go to the altar, confess your sins, get right with Jesus, then spend the rest of your life trying not backslide into damnation.

So far as I’m concerned, the Wesleyan Way is a lot more fun—and entirely Biblical. The decision to follow Christ is not the “end” of our faith journey, but only the beginning of a lifelong adventure along the pilgrim highway.

In his letter to the church in Philippi, the aforementioned apostle Paul shares his own faith journey. Unlike John, who had walked and talked with Jesus, Paul had been among the haters, actively persecuting the Jesus people, before being felled in his tracks by a vision of the risen Christ. Paul had come a long way since his conversion experience, but, in his own estimation, still had a ways to go:

Not that I have already obtained this or have already been made perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which I also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.

Note the term “made perfect.” Remember, John taught that we love only because God first loved us. I can hear John and Paul (the Bible guys, not Lennon & McCartney) joining in a duet:

Have thine own way, Lord
 Have thine own way
 Thou are the potter, I am the clay
 Mold me and make me after thy will
 While I am waiting yielded and still...

The old Wesleyans preached that this “molding” began even in the womb, calling such “prevenient grace.” When you see us baptizing the little ones, this isn’t about photo op, nor the dreadful doctrine of unbaptized babies going to hell. Rather, it’s a sacramental infusion of grace, toward the end of molding and making a Christian life with the ultimate end of perfection. Ditto with Confirmation next weekend.

Be clear on this: Christian perfection didn’t mean you were going to get everything right. Jesus said the whole of the law comes down to this: You shall love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. Christian perfection is about being made perfect in love.

And this is important. As Paul himself was “pressing on,” so was John Wesley, even in his old age. John Wesley himself never claimed to have reached a state of Christian perfection. He did hope it would be granted him in his last breaths, as a final gift of grace.

What was important was not so much that one reach a state of Christian perfection, than intentionally striving in that direction.

Think of it in terms of this hymn:

We are climbing Jacob's ladder
We are climbing Jacob's ladder
We are climbing Jacob's ladder
Soldiers of the cross.

Every round goes higher, higher
Every round goes higher, higher
Every round goes higher, higher
Soldiers of the cross.

“Pressing on,” climbing “higher, higher,” has informed by thinking as regards the next chapter of my life. I see all these commercials on television about retirement planning, most all having to do with financial security. Not that such is unimportant. The Reverends Davis & Davis' long held adherence to Wesleyan economics, “Earn all you can, save all you give all you can,” would seem to have us well positioned in that regard. But I've been at least as concerned about soul planning.

This is a law of physics: An object at rest will stay at rest and an object in motion will stay in motion. So it is, I think, with the mind and soul. My retirement planning includes staying in motion, from which was born the notion of retiring to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and immersing myself in long held passion for the Civil War.

The transition planning has included research on a book project regarding Christian soldiers that may or may not turn out to be something, but will, at the very least, give me something to get up for and pour myself into, learning as I go. That plan, in turn, is allowing me to entirely affirm the joy of these past 44 years in ministry, including the 13 wonderful years I've blessed to serve St. Andrews, and to savor this present moment.

Bottom line: I see what happens next as an opportunity to continue my growth in grace, ascending still higher. If you're not thinking about your next step, perhaps it's time that you do?

Before moving on, let me say a word of deep appreciation to those who are making volunteer work at St. Andrew's a part of your retirement. Keep climbing, folks!

Well, let's see, where were we? 1 John 2:7:

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning: the old commandment is the word that you have heard.

When Jesus spoke in terms of you shall love God and your neighbor, he wasn't making this up. It was right there in the law of Moses.

Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Leviticus 19: 18, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

John continues:

Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says 'I am in the Lord,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

As I read that, if love is not necessarily *all* you need, without love, we are simply lost.

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven on account of his name.

I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one.

I write to you, children, because you know the Father.

I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young people, because you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

And he's writing to you and me:

Do not love the world or the things in this world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world, for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father, but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.