

I John 5:1-6
May 17, '09

“CONQUERING THE WORLD”

(Before scripture)

LAST WEEK WE LOOKED AT THE LECTIONARY READING FROM THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN.
I SUGGESTED THAT I JOHN IS A BOOK THAT, MORE THAN ANY OTHER BOOK OF THE BIBLE, LENDS ITSELF TO A SINGLE WORD SYNOPSIS & THAT ONE WORD IS LOVE.
OVER & OVER AGAIN, THE APOSTLE SPEAKS TO US OF THE IMPORTANCE OF LOVE IN THE LIFE OF A FOLLOWER OF JESUS.

TODAY’S LECTIONARY EPISTLE READING FOLLOWS IMMEDIATELY ON THE HEELS OF LAST WEEK’S.

IT’S DIFFICULT TO KNOW HOW TO MAKE DIVISIONS IN FIRST JOHN & THE ONE THAT IS USED FOR TODAY’S LECTIONARY READING DOESN’T SEEM TO FIT WITH THE WAY MANY COMMENTATORS HAVE DIVIDED THE BOOK, AND YET I THINK IT WORKS WELL IN DRIVING HOME A PARTICULAR POINT THAT JOHN MAY BE MAKING.

OUR SCRIPTURE READING THIS MORNING IS I JOHN 5:1-6.

(After scripture)

THIS IS PRETTY SIMPLE STUFF HERE, ISN’T IT?

IT APPEARS PRETTY STRAIGHTFORWARD & ALL VERY – WELL, CHRISTLIKE.

THE AUTHOR AGAIN IS TELLING US OF THE IMPORTANCE OF LOVE.

FORMER U.S. SENATE CHAPLAIN AND PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER, DR. LLOYD OGILVIE, WRITES ABOUT JOHN ALBRECHT, AN EPISCOPAL PRIEST FROM MICHIGAN.

ALBRECHT WAS TIRED OF COMPLAINTS ABOUT HIS LONG SERMONS. SO HE DECIDED TO PREACH AN UNUSUALLY BRIEF SERMON TO HIS CONGREGATION IN ORDER TO MAKE A POINT.

SO HE STEPPED BEHIND HIS PULPIT AND AFTER A LONG PAUSE HE SAID, “LOVE”.

THEN HE SAT DOWN.

A LONG PERIOD OF SILENCE FOLLOWED.

ALBRECHT’S SERMON MADE IT INTO THE GUINNESS BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS FOR THE SHORTEST SERMON EVER PREACHED.

IS THAT REALLY ALL THAT NEEDS TO BE SAID?

SOME OF YOU MAY BE ON THE EDGE OF YOUR PEW, SILENTLY WHISPERING TO YOURSELF THE OLD NIKE TAGLINE – “JUST DO IT! SAY ‘LOVE’ AND SIT DOWN.”

MAYBE THAT REALLY IS ALL THAT NEEDS TO BE SAID, BUT WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THAT WORD?

AND, WITH THAT, YOU KNOW THAT I’M GOING TO POP YOUR ANTICIPATORY BALLOON.

LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT A FEW THINGS JOHN SAYS HERE TO SEE IF WE CAN DISCOVER SOME DEEPER INSIGHT IN WHAT HE MEANS WHEN HE, OVER & OVER AGAIN, TELLS US TO "LOVE."

RIGHT OFF THE BAT HE TELLS US THAT EVERYONE WHO LOVES THE PARENT LOVES THE CHILD. THIS IS STILL PRETTY BASIC STUFF.

LITERALLY, WHAT JOHN SAYS IS, "*EVERYONE WHO LOVES THE ONE WHO BEGOT LOVES THE ONE BEGOTTEN OF HIM.*"

IN OTHER WORDS, "*EVERYONE WHO LOVES GOD, LOVES GOD'S CHILD.*"

THAT'S STILL PRETTY BASIC STUFF, ISN'T IT?

SO WHY DOES JOHN DWELL ON IT AS HE DOES?

AND WHY DEVOTE TWO SERMONS TO IT AS *I'M* DOING?

I DON'T THINK JOHN HAS YET COMPLETED HIS EXPLORATION OF IT & I DON'T THINK WE HAVE EITHER.

LAST WEEK WE SUGGESTED THAT JOHN IS TELLING US THAT LOVE ISN'T THE WEAK & NAMBY-PAMBY THING WE'VE MADE IT OUT TO BE.

LOVE IS STRONG, POWERFUL & POTENT.

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. TITLED A COMPILATION OF HIS SERMONS "STRENGTH TO LOVE."

WITHIN THAT BOOK, THERE IS A SERMON ENTITLED "THE KNOCK AT MIDNIGHT," BASED ON THE PARABLE JESUS TOLD OF THE PERSISTENT NEIGHBOR – THE ONE WHO KEPT KNOCKING AT HIS FRIEND'S DOOR EVEN AT MIDNIGHT SEEKING ASSISTANCE.

KING TAKES THIS PARABLE AND MASTERFULLY SAYS... "*PEOPLE ARE KNOCKING ON THE DOOR TODAY. AND IT'S THE DOOR OF THE CHURCH.... AND THE CHURCH IS SAYING, IMPLICITLY... 'GO AWAY.'*"

YOU'RE ON THE EDGE OF YOUR PEW ONCE AGAIN, AREN'T YOU?

BUT NOW IT'S NOT IN ANTICIPATION OF A SHORT SERMON, BUT RATHER TO OBJECT TO SUCH A SUGGESTION AS THIS.

THIS CHURCH ISN'T TELLING PEOPLE TO GO AWAY.

THIS CHURCH IS WELCOMING & CARING & INVITING.

THIS CHURCH IS – TO USE JOHN'S THEME SONG – A *LOVING* CHURCH.

ONCE AGAIN, AT LEAST IN OUR OWN MINDS, IT'S ALL VERY SIMPLE.

WE AREN'T TELLING PEOPLE TO GO AWAY.

WE'RE WELCOMING & CARING & INVITING.

WE'RE A "LOVING" CHURCH.

BUT I WONDER – HAVE WE SETTLED FOR A WEAK, NAMBY-PAMBY UNDERSTANDING OF LOVE?

AGAIN, GOING BACK TO LAST WEEK, WE SUGGESTED THAT JOHN USES LANGUAGE THAT WE DON'T CUSTOMARILY ASSOCIATE WITH LOVE.

HE DOES THE SAME THING IN *THIS* PASSAGE.

HE USES WORDS OF STRENGTH.

HE TALKS ABOUT *VICTORY* & NO LESS THAN 3 TIMES, HE REFERS TO *CONQUERING THE WORLD*.

WHAT A PARADOX JOHN OFFERS US HERE – CONQUERING THE WORLD WITH LOVE.

WHEN WE THINK OF SOMEONE BEING A CONQUEROR – ESPECIALLY SOMEONE WHO IS CONQUERING THE WORLD – WE DON'T THINK OF LOVE AS THE MEANS BY WHICH THEIR VICTORY IS ACCOMPLISHED.

IN SOMETHING CALLED *THE TIMELINE INDEX OF HISTORY*, IF YOU LOOK UP “CONQUERORS,” YOU FIND 19 NAMES LISTED.

YOU SEE VERY FAMILIAR NAMES – ALEXANDER THE GREAT, HANNIBAL, ATILLA THE HUN, GENGHIS KHAN, WILLIAM (APPLY DUBBED) THE CONQUEROR, NAPOLEON & ADOLF HITLER.

WHEN WE THINK OF CONQUERORS, THAT'S WHAT WE THINK OF – WE THINK OF MILITARY MIGHT & POLITICAL POWER.

WE CERTAINLY DON'T THINK OF BIBLICAL LOVE WHEN WE THINK OF THE WORD “CONQUER.”

AND YET, ONCE AGAIN, JOHN IS TURNING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THINGS UPSIDE DOWN.

AND NOW, HERE'S WHERE IT GETS VERY INTERESTING.

HERE'S WHERE WE FIND A REASON TO LINK THESE FIRST 6 VERSES OF CHAPTER 5 TOGETHER AS ONE UNIT.

THE FIRST HALF OF VERSE 6 READS, “*THIS IS THE ONE WHO CAME BY WATER AND BLOOD, JESUS CHRIST, NOT WITH THE WATER ONLY BUT WITH THE WATER AND THE BLOOD.*”

NOW WHAT IN THE WORLD CAN JOHN MEAN BY THIS?

STAY WITH ME FOR A MINUTE, BECAUSE WE HAVE TO GO BACK TO HIS GOSPEL TO GET A COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT HE'S SAYING HERE.

IN JOHN'S ACCOUNT OF THE CRUCIFIXION IN JOHN 19, HE SAYS, “...*ONE OF THE SOLDIERS PIERCED JESUS' SIDE WITH A SPEAR, BRINGING A SUDDEN FLOW OF BLOOD & WATER.*”

AND THEN JOHN SAYS, “*THE MAN WHO SAW IT HAS GIVEN TESTIMONY, AND HIS TESTIMONY IS TRUE. HE KNOWS THAT HE TELLS THE TRUTH, AND HE TESTIFIES SO THAT YOU MAY ALSO BELIEVE.*”

NOW WHY DOES HE GO TO SUCH GREAT LENGTHS TO TELL US THAT THIS IS TRUE?

THE ONE HE REFERS TO – *THE MAN WHO SAW IT* – IS, OF COURSE, JOHN HIMSELF.

THE REASON HE MAKES SUCH A POINT OF THIS IS BECAUSE, AT THE TIME HE WAS WRITING, THERE WAS A RAMPANT TEACHING & UNDERSTANDING CALLED “DOCETISM.”

IT COMES FROM A GREEK WORD WHICH MEANS “SEEMED.”

THE IDEA WAS THAT JESUS ONLY “SEEMED” TO BE HUMAN.

HE ONLY “SEEMED” TO HAVE BEEN CRUCIFIED.

HE ONLY “SEEMED” TO HAVE SUFFERED.

THOSE WHO HELD TO THIS UNDERSTANDING OF JESUS BELIEVED HE WAS BAPTIZED – THUS THE WATER.

BUT THEY COULDN'T ACCEPT THE FACT THAT HE WAS CRUCIFIED – THAT HE SHED HIS BLOOD. THAT'S WHY JOHN SAYS HERE – "...NOT BY WATER ONLY BUT WITH THE WATER AND THE BLOOD." HE WAS BAPTIZED AND HE WAS CRUCIFIED.

AND NOW WE'RE GETTING CLOSER TO THE HEART OF JOHN'S UNDERSTANDING OF LOVE. TO STEP EVEN CLOSER, I WANT TO TELL YOU ABOUT A PAINTING THAT WAS DONE BY HANS HOBLEIN THE YOUNGER IN 1521.

IT'S ENTITLED "DEAD CHRIST IN THE TOMB."

MORE THAN LIKELY YOU'VE NEVER SEEN THIS PAINTING – AND FOR GOOD REASON.

IT IS, PERHAPS, ONE OF THE MOST GRUESOME & HORRIFYING PICTURES EVER PAINTED.

THE PAINTING IS LIFE-SIZE AND, AS YOU LOOK AT IT, IT WOULD BE AS IF YOU WERE STANDING IN FRONT OF A COFFIN, WHICH HOLDS AN EMACIATED BODY LYING ON A CRUMPLED, WHITE SHROUD.

THE GREAT RUSSIAN NOVELIST, DOSTOYEVSKY, WAS A MAN WHO ORDINARILY STAYED AS FAR AWAY FROM MUSEUMS & ART GALLERIES AS POSSIBLE, BUT HE DESPERATELY WANTED TO SEE THIS PAINTING.

HE HAD ONLY HEARD OF IT & WHAT HE HAD HEARD IMPRESSED HIM.

WHILE TRAVELLING WITH HIS WIFE, ANNA, HE WENT MANY MILES OUT OF HIS WAY TO THE MUSEUM OF BASEL, SWITZERLAND, TO SEE IT.

LATER, IN HER DIARY, ANNA WOULD DESCRIBE WHAT HAPPENED TO HER HUSBAND WHEN HE EXPERIENCED THAT PAINTING.

SHE WROTE, "*THE PAINTING OVERWHELMED FYODOR, AND HE STOPPED IN FRONT OF IT AS IF STRICKEN...ON HIS AGIATED FACE WAS THE SORT OF FRIGHTENED EXPRESSION I HAD OFTEN NOTED DURING THE MOMENTS OF AN EPILEPTIC SEIZURE. I QUIETLY TOOK MY HUSBAND'S ARM, LED HIM TO ANOTHER ROOM AND MADE HIM SIT DOWN ON A BENCH, EXPECTING HIM TO HAVE A SEIZURE ANY MINUTE.*

FORTUNATELY, IT DIDN'T COME. LITTLE BY LITTLE FYODOR CALMED DOWN, AND WHEN WE WERE LEAVING HE INSISTED ON GOING TO TAKE ANOTHER LOOK AT THE PAINTING THAT HAD MADE SUCH AN IMPRESSION ON HIM."

ANNA'S REACTION TO THE PAINTING WAS ONE OF REVULSION.

IN HER DESCRIPTION OF WHAT SHE SAW, SHE SAYS IT WAS "...AN EMACIATED BODY, THE BONES & RIBS SHOWING, THE HANDS & FEET PIERCED BY WOUNDS, SWOLLEN & VERY BLUE, AS IN A CORPSE THAT IS BEGINNING TO ROT.

THE FACE IS AGONIZED, AND THE EYES ARE HALF OPEN, BUT UNSEEING & EXPRESSIONLESS. THE NOSE, MOUTH, AND CHIN HAVE TURNED BLUE."

WHAT CAUSED REVULSION IN ANNA IS PRECISELY WHAT MOVED DOSTOYEVSKY.

THE BODY OF JESUS – AS IT LAY IN THE TOMB – WAS THE BODY OF A DEAD MAN.

HIS BODY WAS LIKE THAT OF ANYONE ELSE – ROTTING & DECAYING.

TO DOSTOYEVSKY, THIS WAS THE MEANING OF THE CROSS.

IF CHRIST’S BODY WASN’T SUBJECT TO DECAY LIKE OTHER BODIES, THEN HIS SACRIFICE WAS MEANINGLESS.

CHRIST HAD TO BE A PERSON LIKE ANY OTHER PERSON IN ORDER TO DIE FOR US.

YOU SEE, THIS IS WHAT JOHN WAS BATTLING AS HE WROTE HIS GOSPEL & WROTE THIS LETTER.

HE WAS FIGHTING AGAINST THOSE WHO DENIED THE FULL HUMANITY OF JESUS.

WE STILL SEE IT TODAY & THIS IS WHERE WE FIND THE CONNECTION TO THE MEANING OF LOVE THAT JOHN IS TRYING TO CONVEY.

ITS MODERN FORMS APPEAR WHEN PEOPLE PORTRAY JESUS AS A SUPERMAN.

HE WAS NEVER TROUBLED.

HE WAS NEVER SAD.

HE WAS ALWAYS ON TOP OF THINGS.

AND THIS NATURALLY, THEN, LEADS US TO CONCLUDE THAT THE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN IS TO BE THIS WAY.

“IF JESUS WAS NEVER TROUBLED, THEN I SHOULDN’T BE EITHER.”

“IF JESUS WASN’T SAD, WHY SHOULD I BE SAD.”

“IF JESUS WAS ALWAYS ON TOP OF THE WORLD, THEN I SHOULD BE TOO.”

THEY FORGET GETHSEMANE.

THEY FORGET THE CROSS.

THEY FORGET THE VERY REAL HUMAN EMOTIONS JESUS EXPERIENCED.

JOHN IS FIGHTING AGAINST THOSE WHO WOULD LEAVE PEOPLE WITH A SENSE OF FAILURE FOR BEING DEPRESSED OR FOR GOING THROUGH HARD TIMES OR FOR THE IMPERFECT LIFE THEY LIVE.

ISN’T THAT THE CASE IN THE CHURCH TODAY?

WE EXPECT PERFECTION.

WE EXPECT SMILES & LAUGHTER AND HAVE VERY LITTLE PATIENCE FOR SADNESS & TEARS.

WE DON’T TURN PEOPLE AWAY.

WE’RE A WELCOMING CHURCH, A CARING CHURCH, AN INVITING CHURCH.

AND YET WE CONVEY AN EXPECTATION OF PERFECTION.

WE EXPECT IT OF ONE ANOTHER & WE EXPECT IT OF THOSE WHO WOULD DARE TO VISIT US.

AND THIS IS WHERE JOHN DESPERATELY TRIES TO PROVIDE US WITH ALTERNATE IMAGES.

HE GIVES US A DIFFERENT IMAGE OF LOVE, A DIFFERENT IMAGE OF VICTORY, A DIFFERENT IMAGE OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CONQUEROR.

HE STARTS WITH JESUS & TELLS US HE WAS A REAL MAN WHO ENDURED REAL PAIN, A MAN WHO SHED REAL BLOOD & DIED A VERY REAL DEATH.

IT IS A CALL TO US TO BE REAL & TO ALLOW OTHERS TO DO THE SAME.

IN LAST WEEK'S PASSAGE, JOHN TOLD US THAT WE LOVE BECAUSE GOD FIRST LOVED US.

AND THE LOVE OF GOD IS A LOVE THAT DOESN'T CARRY WITH IT EXPECTATIONS OF PERFECTION.

GOD'S LOVE IS A LOVE THAT ACCEPTS US AS WE ARE – IMPERFECTIONS & ALL.

THAT IS VICTORIOUS LOVE.

IT IS LOVE THAT CONQUERS THE WORLD.

IT IS THAT KIND OF LOVE THAT JOHN CHALLENGES US TO EXTEND TO ONE ANOTHER & TO THOSE OUTSIDE THE FAMILY OF FAITH.

IT'S A LOVE THAT DOESN'T DEMAND OR EVEN EXPECT AN EVER-PRESENT SMILE & UNENDING LAUGHTER.

IT'S A LOVE THAT UNDERSTANDS & ACCEPTS THE REALITY THAT WE'RE ALL FRAIL & FRAGILE CREATURES – THAT WE EXPERIENCE EMOTIONAL & PHYSICAL PAIN.

IT'S A LOVE THAT KNOWS WE AREN'T PERFECT – THAT WE'VE FAILED IN THE PAST, ARE PERHAPS IN THE MIDST OF A PRESENT FAILURE & ARE BOUND TO FAIL AGAIN IN THE FUTURE.

JOHN'S KIND OF LOVE TURNS THE WORLD'S KIND UPSIDE DOWN.

IT'S VICTORIOUS.

IT'S CONQUERING.

IT'S HONEST & IT'S REAL.

OH, THAT WE MIGHT EMBRACE, EMBODY & EXPRESS THAT KIND OF LOVE – THE LOVE TO WHICH JOHN CALLS US.

IT REALLY *WOULD* TURN THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN. AMEN.

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