

***First Things First***  
**A Sermon on 1 John 3:11-24**  
**Fourth Sunday of Easter**  
**April 22, 2018**

**Introduction**

How do we be church together? What are our core beliefs and practices as Christians? That is the problem that 1 John is wrestling with.

There is a crisis in John's community. The followers of Jesus disagree about what they are to believe and how they are to act. Apparently there has recently been a church split. 1 John gives us the perspective of one of the leaders of the group that stayed. Raymond Brown, one of the leading scholars on John in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, calls those who left secessionists, and I also will refer to them as secessionists.

Today's text begins a new section in 1 John. The author, who I will refer to as the elder, which is what the author calls himself in 2 John and 3 John, turns his attention to the group that has stayed. He apparently was part of the community while the Beloved Disciple was still alive. Being church together is still a new thing. The elder is telling the newer members of the community what they should believe and how they should act. He is getting back to basics.

**First Move: Recovering from a Church Split**

The two groups are interpreting the Gospel of John and applying it to their lives as church together. The conflict between them shows that there are different ways to interpret the Gospel of John. Differences are latent in the text, and they surface when the Gospel is lived out.

The first difference is in Christology. John has the highest Christology of all the Gospels, and the secessionists take it even higher. Matthew and Luke have birth narratives in which Jesus is described as the Son of God from the moment of conception. John is the only Gospel in which Jesus is the pre-existent Logos who was with God at creation. The secessionists emphasize the divinity of Christ and minimize the earthly ministry of Jesus. They believe that salvation came when God sent Jesus to earth to gather the believers; whoever believes that Jesus is the Son of God receives eternal life. Jesus does not suffer on the cross as he does in the Synoptic Gospels. In Mark, Jesus says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." For

Jesus to say that is inconceivable in the Gospel of John. Jesus says, “It is finished.” Jesus is in control of his destiny, even on the cross, in John.

The elder also has a high Christology, but he emphasizes the humanity of Jesus to distinguish his group from the secessionists. He says that we have heard him and seen him with our own eyes and felt him with our hands. Jesus is the word made flesh who dwelled among us.

Different Christologies produce different eschatology and different ethics. The secessionists believe that by becoming children of God, they are sinless, just as Jesus was sinless. Sinlessness is a realized truth: that is what children of God are like. The secessionists give no salvific importance to ethical behavior. That is a possible reading of the Gospel of John. It is true that the Gospel of John is notably deficient in ethics as compared to the Synoptic Gospels. There is no Sermon on the Mount or Sermon on the Plain in John. The great sin in the Gospel of John is refusal to believe that Jesus was sent by God.

The elder sees sinlessness not as a present reality, but as an obligation. He sees Jesus’ earthly life as a model for others. In the Gospel of John there is only one commandment: love your brothers just as I have loved you.

Today’s text starts with “the message that you heard from the beginning: Love one another.” The elder is worried that some of those who have remained will be influenced by the teaching of the secessionists. The elder believes that the secessionists showed by leaving that they do not love their brothers.

The elder also is eschatological. Eschatology was in the water when all four of the gospels were written. An eschatological outlook was dominant in Jewish thought in the period between the writing of the Old Testament and the New Testament. The belief was that God would be intervening in human history soon to rescue the persecuted righteous and to set things straight. All people will be judged—the sheep will be separated from the goats. It leads to a dualistic outlook. The elder uses dualistic language of light and darkness, love and hate, life and death. Death is not an event but a realm to which belong darkness and hatred. There is no middle ground between hate and love.

The elder uses Cain as an example of evil—he slaughters his brother instead of loving his brother. This sounds harsh, but it reflects reality. Most murders are committed against family members.

The elder expresses hostility to the world. “Do not be surprised, brothers, if the world hates you.” The world probably represents Gentiles who have rejected the gospel message. Yet there are no words of judgment in 1 John for the world or for the secessionists. The elder turns the focus inward. Don’t you be like that. The elder

believes that his community is struggling to survive. The mission of the believing community recedes because of the struggle for survival.

## **Second Move: The Great Commandment**

The elder says that Jesus is the model not Cain. Christian love arises from the eschatological revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He laid down his life for his friends. The cross is full of salvific meaning for the elder. Love means giving one's life for another and hate is taking the life of another.

Laying down your life for others sounds impossible; something you can only do once. The elder gives a practical example that arises in daily living. Laying down our lives means setting aside our needs for the needs of other. We lay down our lives when we put others first. Whoever has more than he needs and sees a brother in need is obligated to help the brother. Brother means someone in the church, not a homeless man, someone we know. If we can't take care of each other in church, we really don't have anything to offer the world outside the church.

Belief is not enough for the elder. Belief should lead to a changed life. "Children, do not love in word and in speech, but in deed and in truth." Belief should lead to action.

The elder then shows that he loves his brothers. He speaks as a pastor to them, offering words of comfort.

Laying down your life for others is a big ask. The more ethically minded people in the community may feel a sense of guilt. They may feel condemned by their own hearts. The elder reassures them that God knows everything about you, and God does not condemn you. Even if the world hates you, God loves you.

The elder says that should give us boldness before God. We can ask God for the resources we need to live faithfully, and God will provide. This is not the prosperity gospel. This is asking on behalf of others, as Jesus does in the unity prayer in John 17. God knows that you are trying to keep the commandments and do what is pleasing to God.

The elder collapses the commandments into one: that we believe in the name of his son, Jesus Christ, and that we love one another.

Believing that Jesus was sent by God means that we look at the cross through the eyes of love. Christ laid down his life for us to give us eternal life. Eternal life in 1 John means communion with God and Jesus. We enjoy life right now in all its fullness.

Bonding is more important than bridging at this stage of group development. The church is a new, fragile thing in 1 John. Unless the church can come together on core issues of identity and ethics, it will fall apart. Bridging comes later.

### **Third Move: Love Within the Church**

As Disciples of Christ, we are part of the Stone Campbell movement, which began a little over 200 years ago. It is also called a restoration movement. One of our core beliefs is that Disciples need to get back to the model of the New Testament church. Our founders, Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, believed that Christians needed to love one another. For 200 years after the Protestant Reformation, there were religious wars in Europe, Catholics against Anglicans in England, Huguenots against Calvinists in France, Lutherans against Anabaptists in Germany, which was then known as the Holy Roman Empire. The wars were always Christians against Christians.

Campbell and Stone believed in the unity of all Christians. Creeds and denominations have divided Christians. If we could just get back to the New Testament church, we would usher in a new era of world peace.

What we see from 1 John is that there never was one model of a New Testament church. Bill Tabbernee in his latest book on Christian origins refers to early Christianities. Raymond Brown believes that Peter and the disciples formed a group of churches that he calls Apostolic Christians—they focused on the Synoptic Gospels. John's community focused on the Gospel of John. When Jesus prays for the unity of all disciples in John 17, he may be praying for the Apostolic churches and the Johannine churches to come together.

The dispute between the elder's community and the secessionists arises from two legitimate interpretations of the Gospel of John. When the Beloved Disciple died, the community lost an authority figure who walked with Jesus. Conflict emerged as they dealt with a succession crisis.

We prefer the elder's interpretation today because it went on to become Christian orthodoxy. He curbs the excesses in the Gospel of John. The elder has a high Christology but not so high as to discount the earthly ministry of Jesus and his death on the cross. He places a high value on confession and belief, but not so high that it eliminates the need for ethics. He is dualistic, but he turns the dualism toward himself and his community. Don't be a murderer. Take the log out of your own eye. If you are going to talk about sin, start by talking about your own sin.

We still need to hear the elder's message. Evangelicals believe once saved, always saved. That easily leads to quietism, just waiting for the end of the world,

when a blessed life awaits. Liberals tend to reduce Jesus to a role model and a teacher. Jesus is more than that: the elder proclaims that Jesus is our savior. He rescues us from death and enables us to pass over to life right now. The gift of divine love makes new life possible. How does the love of Christ make a difference in your life? We need to hear, especially today, that we have obligations and responsibilities, not just rights.

Raymond Brown hopes we can learn from the dangers in the Bible as well as the insights. The tendency in John toward dualism is dangerous when it is applied to others outside the church. Christian history has given us 2,000 years of proof of that: the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, Christian supersessionism and pogroms against Jews, demonization of Muslims.

The hostility of the world remains a warning against naivete. The world is not unplowed ground waiting to be sown with the Gospel. Christians should keep ministering to the world but don't be surprised when you are rejected.

There is a prince of this world who is actively hostile to Jesus. Political power is inimical to the Christian way of life. Political power is inherently coercive. Even in a democracy, the majority forces its will on the minority. Partisan politics is demonic.

The church cannot hope to change hearts and minds unless it begins with the church. Saying you believe in Jesus is not enough. Discipleship is a continual process of repentance. That is why it is the theme of Advent and Lent every year. Non violence and Christian love does not come to us naturally. It is a way of life based on spiritual practices.

We live in an age of church splits. People get mad and leave the church. We had a lot of conflict in this congregation for the first 25 years after we were founded. In the early years we had 120 people in worship on Sundays. If people in the church cannot bridge partisan differences and love their brothers and sisters in the church, the church has nothing to offer the world.

The love of Christ makes a difference. Church is a true community where everyone knows your name. Your brothers and sisters in Christ visit you when you are in the hospital. They comfort you when a loved one dies. They make food for you once a month at fellowship dinners. They pray for you. They help you feel the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

## **Conclusion**

God is love. How many times have you heard that? The elder says that more emphatically than anyone else in the New Testament.

The elder reminds us to put first things first. We cannot call ourselves a church unless we love our brothers and sisters, just as Jesus loved us. That is the great commandment. Everything else falls out of that.

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