

Testifying to Eternal Life
A Sermon on 1 John 5:6-13
Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 13, 2018

Introduction

Our six weeks in 1 John have given us a look at growing pains in an early Christian community. This letter is written perhaps ten years after the Gospel of John. In those ten years the Johannine community has not lived up to the elder's hope. The community has divided and the majority has gone out into the world.

The elder is disappointed. The secessionists were closely related to the author. They also referred to the Gospel of John and the Johannine tradition as the basis of their authority. It shows how hard it is to build and maintain a community based on the gospel. People naturally have different perspectives and will have different interpretations and different emphases.

The secessionists pursue some of the logical implications of the Gospel of John. The elder believes that they have gone too far. His views ultimately prove to be more attractive to the Apostolic Christians who follow the Synoptic Gospels. The elder's community will later merge with the Apostolic Christians and his views will become orthodox Christianity. The secessionists and their progeny in faith will be deemed heretical.

First Move: Know That You Have Eternal Life

For the elder, the key to understanding the Johannine tradition correctly is incarnational Christology. Jesus in the flesh is what really matters. Jesus in the flesh shows us that God cares about people in the flesh. Jesus in the flesh leads us to God and to people in the flesh.

The elder says, "Jesus came through water and blood, not in the water only, but in the water and in the blood." Water and blood refers to the death of Jesus in John 19:34b, when blood and water come out of his side. The secessionists may have exaggerated the significance of the baptism and ignored the death. They may have been influenced by Greek thought and believed that Jesus was impassable: what is really real is unchanging. They may have believed that Jesus descended from heaven at his baptism and that his spirit ascended before his death. The elder emphasizes the death through water *and* blood. Death is an essential component of the incarnation.

The elder believes that the secessionists denied salvific significance to the death of Jesus. 1 John emphasizes the saving effect of Jesus' death more than the Gospel of John. For the elder, Jesus' real humanity is epitomized in his death. Jesus suffers with us. He shares our pain.

The elder says that there are three who testify, the spirit and the water and the blood, and their testimony is one. The one thing they testify to is the incarnation of Jesus. The spirit, water and blood are experienced as realities in the lives of those who believe; they are grounded in the life and death of the Son.

The elder is building an argument; he relies upon three witnesses about the salvific significance of his death. He suggests that the secessionists rely only upon the testimony of John the Baptist, who testifies in John 1:31 that he came baptizing with water for this reason: that Jesus the Lamb of God might be revealed to Israel.

The elder appeals to a higher authority by relying on the testimony of God. "If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater . . . [and] he [God] has testified concerning his son." Faith is about trusting in the Christological understanding that God gives us about Jesus as his son. The community of believers is founded on and lives by testimony. At its heart is the testimony that God gives, to authenticate his son.

To the secessionists, the son of God belongs to the mythical sphere in which he does battle with the devil. The elder also believes that Jesus acts in the mythical sphere, but the elder further believes that Jesus acts in the flesh.

To refuse to acknowledge the son in both spheres is to refuse to trust God. The elder says that the secessionists treat God as a liar because they have not believed in his testimony. That sounds harsh, but the elder is drawing on the dispute in John 8 between Jesus and the Jews, where Jesus calls the Jews liars because they do not receive his testimony. That is problematic, but it is part of John's gospel. The elder is appealing to tradition and to texts that the Johannine Christians held in common with the secessionists.

God's ultimate testimony is that whoever believes in Jesus has received salvation in the form of eternal life through the son. Eternal life has its roots in the hope of the age to come, but the elder tells his community that they already have received the gift of eternal life. The division between those who have eternal life and those who don't is established in the present. The author's intent is to reinforce the allegiance of those to whom he writes and to make clear the stark consequences of withdrawing.

The elder tells his community that he writes so that they might know that they possess eternal life. He presumes that they believe that Jesus as the son of God is the incarnation.

This text may have been the original closing of the letter. It has a similar ending to John 20, emphasizing that belief in Jesus as the Christ brings eternal life.

Second Move: Sharing in God's Life

I would like to look closer at two words that the elder uses repeatedly: testimony and eternal life but doesn't define. The Greek noun, μαρτυρίον, and its verb form, μαρτυρέω, appear ten times in today's text. They are usually translated as testimony and to testify. Life or eternal life appear six times.

Raymond Brown, a Catholic New Testament scholar, says that today's text is an excellent example of the strengths and weaknesses of the author. We can admire his burning conviction, but that is offset by the utter obscurity of what he is talking about, though it may have been clear to his readers, who shared his linguistic world.

Herman Strathmann, a German scholar, writes in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* that the noun and verb for testimony and testify come from the Greek root, σμερ-, which means to bear in mind, to remember, to be careful. In Greek secular use, these words come from the legal world, where they denote one who can and does speak from personal experiences about actions in which he took part and which happened to him. It is used outside law courts to denote objective witness or proof to confirm a statement. In religious writing, it signifies the proclamation of views or truths of which the speaker is convinced. It relates to things which by their very nature cannot be submitted to empirical investigation.

In the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, Israel gives witness before the nations about God's acts of calling and redemption in Isaiah 43:9ff and 44:7ff. The content of this witness is God's saving work in history. They are facts of a higher order that cannot be observed and attested like other facts of earthly occurrence. The witness refers to revealed and believed truth.

Testimony and testifying in John is witness solely to the figure of Jesus, to his person and significance. It is not witness to the factuality of his history, though it is presupposed and even emphasized. When Jesus no longer stays on earth, the Spirit is the witness. It is a spirit of truth which, especially in baptism and the Lord's Supper, bears witness to the Son of God as the one who gives eternal life.

Witness in John is witness not so much to historical truth as to the deeper sense of witnessing a revelation of the glory of Jesus. The person who is simply a witness in the historical sense sees nothing of this glory. It is disclosed only to the believer.

And it is disclosed to all believers, not just believers who were historical eyewitnesses.

Life or eternal life has its roots in Psalm 1, which was our responsive Psalm reading today. There are two ways of life: the way of those who delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night and the way of those who scoff at the law. The righteous are like trees planted by streams of water that yield their fruit in its season and the wicked are like chaff that the wind blows away. The righteous are rooted in eternity.

Eternal life for John, according to Raymond Brown, is the life that God himself lives. The Son of God receives this life from the Father. By believing in Jesus, humans can share in God's life. Natural life is given when God breathes his spirit into the dust of the earth. Eternal life is given when Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. The Spirit is the life-giving force.

The real enemy of eternal life is not death but sin, for death cannot destroy eternal life. God's life endures from everlasting to everlasting.

Third Move: Testifying to a Changed Live

Testifying about eternal life sounds like a very evangelical sermon title. Mainline Christians don't like to talk about testifying or about eternal life. It reminds us of altar calls and preachers scaring people into coming to Jesus to escape the wrath of an angry God. Mainline Christians would much rather talk about mission and social justice.

Martha Grace Reece in *Unbinding the Gospel* says that too many mainline churches feel that evangelism is beneath them. *Unbinding the Gospel* is the first book that we read in Wednesday night classes, in the summer of 2009. Authentic evangelism is proclaiming the good news about what God is doing in your life. At the heart of evangelism is a vivid relationship with God. It is people talking about how God has made a difference in their lives.

We should frown on churches who use evangelism as a recruitment tool to add members. The purpose of testimony is not to bring in more people to pay offering and to do work around the church. People who share their faith do it because they love God and believe that other people's lives would be richer if they were in relationship with God.

A good definition of God is what is really real. The essence of reality is relational. Nothing exists in isolation. Every thing and every force in creation reacts to and interacts with other things and other forces. If we are to share in God's life, we will live in relationship.

Eternal life today is about authentic relationships. Martha Grace Reece points to a trinity of relationships: our mystical relationships with God and Jesus, healthy relationships with people in the congregation, and caring relationships with people outside the church who don't have a conscious connection with God. Evangelism is about testifying, sharing with other people how our lives are richer through the trinity of relationships.

There are different types of relationships. Jesus came in the flesh, but our relationship with him today is mystical. God is invisible. We connect with God through a mystical relationship. Mystical simply means that we don't connect with them through our senses or through reason. We connect through inner experience. We open ourselves up to the spirit of God and the spirit of Christ that runs through us. Mystical comes from the Greek word, μυστήριον, which means mystery, hidden, secret. People feel empty today because their inner life is death, they have no mystical connections. They are sleep walking through their lives.

Eternal life also entails entering into physical relationships with creation and creatures. We live in harmony with creation. We know and respect our place, our physical environment, the soil, the plants and animals, the natural habitat of the place we live. We live in harmony with other creatures. We don't hate people and we don't argue with them. We try to see all people as children of God. When we disagree, we try to understand their point of view and let them know that they have been heard. We live peaceably in the world.

Eternal life is life in all its fullness, lived in mystical communion with God and Jesus and in physical communion with creation and all of God's creatures.

These interlocking relationships complement and reinforce each other. Mystical relationships are incomplete if they lead us away from other people to quietism. Relationships with people outside the church, especially in social justice work, can exhaust us unless we are built up with the love that we feel from relationships with people inside the church. Mystical connections with God and Christ challenge us, comfort us and heal us.

How good are you at testimony? Can you tell people the difference that a relationship with God makes in your life? Can you tell people about your relationships with people in this church and people outside the church and that has made you whole?

Most people long for a peaceable way of life, they just don't know how to walk with others in peace. Most people long for a variety of meaningful relationships that are filled with love.

You can bring them God's peace and love through your testimony.

Conclusion

1 John talks about love and about loving your brothers and sisters in Christ more than any other book in the New Testament.

Yes, 1 John is dualistic and judgmental. The elder doesn't always practice what he preaches. He accuses the secessionists of hating and lying. It reflects a schism that never healed. The elder doesn't try to hide it. There is brokenness in human community.

We can be thankful to the elder for bringing us back to the basics and being honest. Believing that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God changes our lives. It allows us to share in God's eternal life.

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