

That Our Joy May Be Full

He had been a young man, once, full of the pride of life. In those days, everyone had remarked on the appropriateness of his name, Yohanan, “Graced by God.” He had indeed been touched by God’s grace, gifted with good looks and an athlete’s body. He’d been strong enough as a young teenager to work like a man in his father’s fishing fleet and he could run like the wind, easily outdistancing even his older brother Yaakov. He still loved to tell the story of how he’d outrun his friend Simeon the Rock to their Master’s tomb on that strange morning – the morning that had changed everything.

Even the Master, Yeshua, had seemed to have a special place in his heart for young Yohanan. He and Yaakov, along with Simeon, had become a sort of inner circle for Yeshua among his twelve companions. So many times he had drawn them apart for special teaching – they alone had seen his amazing transformation on top of the mountain the day that Moshe the Lawgiver and Eliyahu the Prophet had appeared beside him. But Yohanan, remembered, they had also failed their beloved Rabbi, the three of them, when they could not stay awake and watch with him on the night he was betrayed. And he and Yaakov had given the Master special reason to be displeased with them when they openly jockeyed for position in his Kingdom; his Kingdom that they did not yet understand was not of this world.

Oh, he had been a brash boy in those days, he thought. And now he was old, years past even the threescore and ten promised by the Scriptures for those who were righteous. So old was Yohanan that his disciples here in Ephesus, so far from his home on the Sea of Galilee, did not even call him by their Greek version of his name, Yohannes, but instead referred to him, in a rather awestruck fashion, as “Presbyteros,” “The Old Man.”

It made him chuckle. He didn’t *feel* old. Oh, certainly the days of his beauty and athleticism were long over. His speed was now restricted to a slow hobble. He knew his mind wandered from time to time – he had seen so much! But that was also what kept him feeling young. So much of what he had seen and heard had been connected with Yeshua, the *messiah*, the Anointed One of God. Anytime he thought of Yeshua, he felt young again, as if the years melted away and he was once again walking the roads of Galilee or the hills of Judea with his Master and his brother and his friends. It brought him such joy.

His flock of disciples brought him joy, too, most of the time. Teaching them the things that Yeshua had said and done, sharing with them the things he had learned in his so-long life; these things he loved and he loved his students, too. For the same reasons they called him “Old Man,” he lovingly called them “Children” – not only was he older than their grandsires, they were his children in the faith. Oh, when he was feeling more formal, he would refer to them as “fathers” and “young people” to distinguish the new converts from those who’d learned from him for some time. But mostly, to Yohanan, they were all “little children.” And they did bring him joy.

But now, he was troubled. Some of his little children had begun to listen to teachings from strangers; strangers with dangerous teachings. These interlopers had scoffed at the Old Man’s stories of Yeshua. The Christ could not be a flesh and blood man, they said. All flesh was evil and could not be connected with the True God. God’s Anointed was a Spirit, they said, who only took on the appearance of a man. The Christ had not truly died on the cross; it was impossible. And worse of all, these strange teachers had convinced some of Yohanan’s students

That Our Joy May Be Full

that their spirits, saved by their knowledge of the Christ, were no longer held back by their bodies, so what their bodies did or had done to them was of no consequence – whatever “sin” their bodies might commit could not be attributed to their souls. So some of the Old Man’s disciples, *former* disciples now, he grieved, had turned to lives of licentiousness, ignoring their calling to live lives pleasing to God. Some had gone the other direction, punishing and abusing the bodies they no longer saw as themselves. Such division it had brought to the church in Ephesus; such strife and even hatred.

He must stir himself, thought Yohanan. It had gone beyond his ability to correct with conversations in small groups or between friends, as he preferred to teach. This teaching of a Christ who only *seemed* to be a man had become widespread. So he would have to put pen to paper and write out a lesson that could be carried to many churches and copied. He had to remind believers everywhere that still there was a man among them who had *seen* the man Yeshua, who had heard his voice and felt the strength of his arm. He, Yohanan, had been there when the Christ taught and ate and slept and laughed and wept and died and rose again. The Master had once called him and his brother “the sons of thunder” for their hot tempers and boisterous ways. Well, Yohanan of Galilee could rouse himself to thunder once more. But this time, oh, this time, it would be for love.

And that is how it might have been that the document we now call the First General Epistle of John came to be. I’ve preached very little from this little book in my seven years among you and not at all from the two even shorter books that follow it. With a couple of breaks for special Sundays, I hope to remedy that over the next several weeks with a survey of I John and perhaps a quick look at the latter two as well. I find them especially pertinent now, as indeed they always are, for the theme of all three is of the great love that God has for us and that we, in turn, should have for our sisters and brothers. And in this particular section, the love which John understands to come from Christ Jesus is matched by John’s joy in Christ’s presence.

As scholars have noted for centuries, this first book of the three scarcely fits the definition of an epistle at all. It is less a personal letter (there is no salutation, no indication of a recipient, no personal references) and more a tract, published and spread abroad to teach and to correct. Both the language of I John and the tradition surrounding it link this little book to the Gospel which bears John’s name. Listen again to a sampling of the opening of this letter and then to a similar sample from the Gospel: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our 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... God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and 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 in 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... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” If these words were not written by the same man, they almost certainly came from the same community. This understanding is bolstered by an account contained in one of the oldest Christian documents we have which are not in the Bible. Irenaeus was the Bishop of Lyons, in what is now France, from approximately

That Our Joy May Be Full

A.D. 177 to 202. He writes that as a boy, he was a student of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, in what is now Turkey, and that Polycarp, in turn, had been a student of John the Apostle in Ephesus. Irenaeus goes on to quote from these epistles and the Gospel as the works of the Apostle John. As Edward McDowell writes in his commentary on these epistles for the Broadman Bible Commentary, “It seems reasonable, in the absence of positive evidence to the contrary, to accept the evidence of the early church fathers, who were closer to the scene by 1800 years than twentieth-century scholars.”

But rather more important than considerations of authorship is the message of this brief book and its themes. John says, “We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete,” and it seems to me that he is referring not only to his own joy but to that of everyone who will read his message. Although he deals with what he sees as serious challenges to the faith of the young church, there is a joy which permeates this book which connects back to John’s own experience (and hopefully ours) of the presence of the Risen Christ. As I indicated in my rather fanciful opening to this sermon, John seems to be filled with the joy of his memories of Jesus both before the awful events in Jerusalem and after the unexpected sight of the empty tomb and of Jesus’ miraculous return to his friends. For John, it seems, “Every Morning is Easter Morning.”

We sang those words together as we gathered this morning but I must confess that I do not always feel their truth. I am not always able to banish guilt and fear. I still fall prey to boredom and loneliness. I don’t always feel the excitement and joy of being one of the Easter People, some 42 years after my baptism. Perhaps some of the rest of you feel the same. Indeed, I suspect that it is the rare believer who can spring from bed each morning in full consciousness of the many gifts of God in their life, including the ultimate gift of life in Christ. We need reminders like John’s little book, like coming together with our friends for worship and fellowship. It is why this time is so precious to us.

When we recognize the shadows that still haunt our lives, shadows like guilt and fear or anger and hatred, we can clearly hear the warning of John that to say we have no sin is falsehood and that puts us out of fellowship with God through Christ. We must always remember that we are, as Martin Luther put it, *simul justus et peccator* – simultaneously saint and sinner. The teaching spread by those strange teachers I mentioned earlier that the pure soul could not be touched by the sin of the body is simply wrong. We must always be ready to combat our worst impulses, our brokenness, and work to live lives closer to the will of God. There is no divide between our soul and our body in this life – the two are intimately connected in a holistic way. Disease or dysfunction of the body can be reflected in a troubled soul; stress to the soul is often manifested in the body. When John insists on the full humanity of Christ, the man he first knew as Yeshua, the carpenter from Nazareth, he is standing against those who would falsely claim that incarnation and redemption are not tied together. The Christ’s humanity matters – the blessedness of all humanity matters – the goodness of all Creation matters, to God and to those who walk in the light of God. We should no more turn our backs on the health of our planet or on the welfare of our neighbors or on the soundness of our own bodies than we should ignore our eternal relationship with our Loving Creator.

If this is part of John’s message, what then does he mean by warning against “love of the world?” It is not the Father’s Creation to which he refers here but rather the construct of human

That Our Joy May Be Full

culture insofar as it is captive to the power of death and sin. If we are held captive by our desire for “things,” or if we seek dominance over others rather than a nurturing, self-giving love of our neighbors, then, in John’s terminology, we are in love with “the world.” J. B. Phillips, in his Modern English translation published about a year after my birth, gets it exactly right, I think. Here’s I John 2:15-17 in his words: “Never give your hearts to this world or to any of the things in it. A man cannot love the Father and love the world at the same time. For the whole world-system, based as it is on men’s primitive desires, their greedy ambitions and the glamour of all that they think splendid, is not derived from the Father at all, but from the world itself. The world and all its passionate desires will one day disappear. But the man who is following God’s will is part of the permanent and cannot die.” John knew full well what it meant to be captive to what older translations call “the pride of life.” When he followed Jesus in Galilee and Judea, he had indeed been a young man with many advantages. But the God-given wisdom he had as an old man had taught him that these things do not last.

But even when we fall short, John writes, even when we give in to our baser instincts, even when we are seduced away from the will of God by the glamour of the world, Jesus stands as an advocate for us. The word John uses here is *παρακλητος*, the same word he uses in the Gospel to record Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit. The Risen Christ, the Holy Spirit that lives in our hearts, both these persons of the Trinity have a role in comforting us and in presenting us as innocent before the Father. In fact, John goes on to say, Jesus Christ the righteous one is “the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” I’m not sure that words like “atoning sacrifice” or “expiation” or “propitiation” as used in other English translations really capture the best meaning here. McDowell points out that the Greek word used by John here is used in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) to render the Hebrew word “kipurim,” meaning “covering.” If you have Jewish friends, you may be familiar with the word “kippah,” Modern Hebrew for the skullcap worn ceremoniously by Jewish men. McDowell writes, “The scriptural use of the terms is not to convey the idea of appeasing one who is angry toward another but of altering or removing the cause of alienation. The idea of propitiating or appeasing God is foreign to the New Testament. The sinner is reconciled to God, but God does the reconciling by providing in Christ the means of the reconciliation.” The picture evoked is of God carefully covering the sin of the believer so that it no longer need be taken into consideration. The last paragraph of the Book of Micah contains this prophecy: “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”

John also wants to emphasize to his readers the centrality of Jesus’ teachings as well as of his work on their behalf. “We may be sure we know him,” the old man writes, “if we obey his commandments.” When I read this, my mind goes immediately back to the Gospel according to John and the “New Commandment” that he gave his disciples at their last Passover together: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” And, indeed, this seems to be the upshot of what John has in mind. It is no longer a new commandment to his readers, he says, for they have had it since the beginning. But

That Our Joy May Be Full

the love they bear for each other and for all the brothers and sisters is the sure sign that they live in the light of Christ.

How desperately we still need this lesson. Just as in John's day, the Body of Christ is riven with dissension and disagreement. After twenty centuries, we still cannot manage to hold differences of opinion without reviling and hating our sisters and brothers. When leaders of Christian communities can still refer to other Christians who faithfully hold to beliefs different than theirs as "deficient" or "not true churches" or even as "intrinsically disordered," then we clearly have a failure of love. When Christians caught up in politics or points of Biblical translation begin to call each other "tools of Satan," or "demon-possessed," we have not yet learned to love one another as Christ loved us. When, as Jesus warned, we call each other "fool" and commit murder in our hearts, love is not in us and we have descended into darkness.

My sisters and my brothers, let us do all we can to walk in the light. It is, as the Psalmist sang, a good and pleasant thing when brothers and sisters live in harmony. As I said to the Assembly of the Church Council two weeks ago when they elected me to be their president, we, all of us together, need all of each other because that is what it means to be the Body of Christ. We need each other's diversity, diversity of origin, diversity of politics, diversity of belief, to come anywhere near a complete understanding of God's creation, let alone the Creator of All. We must love each other. We must listen patiently, even when we are in deep disagreement; we must be kind even when we have been hurt. We cannot insist that only our way is the right way. We must believe in the Spirit which inhabits all those who seek to follow Christ, even when the way they take seems different from our own. None of us can perceive the whole truth of God – our sight is clouded. We must listen to each other and pray for each other in love.

We are so blessed, my dear friends, to have a community here at Good Shepherd, where there is so little strife. But we must always remember to be ambassadors of Christ's love as we go out into the divided, warring world in which we live. We must carry the light of the world, the power of Jesus wherever we go. We must give the joy of Christ to others that our joy may be full. Let us go now, walking, singing, dancing, praying in the light of God for the world needs that light, that joy and that love. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God, and Mother of us all, amen.