

Love and Truth

We had such an outpouring of love for each other last week in our Festival Sunday worship service, that there was no time for me to preach about love. And that, it seems to me, is really how it should be. I can stand up here and talk about love until I'm blue in the face but if we, as a community, don't live out that love for God and God's creation, then what difference does it really make? So while my spirit is lifted by reading John's rich words about love in all three of the epistles and the gospel that bear his name, that is nothing compared to sharing together with you the remembrance of how we have all shown love for each other over the course of the year by our service to each other and showing our love and appreciation for that service and for those among us who've achieved special goals. It is our actions even more than our words that show our love for God by how we treat each other and all of those whom God puts in our path. As John wrote in his first epistle, "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another... Little children, let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action." This being said, however, part of the action expected of me as your pastor is to talk about things of the spirit, so today I am going to talk about love. I trust you will receive me lovingly.

If love is without a doubt the number one theme of all of John's writing, then the second, to borrow a Biblical phrase, is like unto it: truth. So in today's sermon, I want to present to you some ideas about love and truth and also some thoughts about their intersection. We'll also take some quick detours to explain some of the situations and personalities behind this little letter and, as usual, end with what II John means to us. "How then shall we live?"

First, a few trivial truths or, as the current generation has learned to call them from "USA Today," factoids. II John is two verses shorter than its rival for the title of the Bible's shortest book, III John, or, if you prefer, seven letters shorter. Both epistles were likely written to fit on one sheet of papyrus, a cheaper medium for writing letters than parchment but still pricey enough at the time. The papyrus sheet would have been about five by nine, not terribly different in size from modern note paper, and made from the pith inside the stalks of papyrus reeds. Some of you will no doubt remember the ill-fated papyrus plant that was in our Fellowship Hall for several years after Kathy McLean showed us during Children's Time how papyrus was made. So you can imagine, if you will, a single sheet of that rather thick, light brown paper (a word, by the way, which comes from papyrus) carefully filled with Greek letters formed by a quill pen and an ink made of soot and water.

The writer, or at least the one who dictated the writing, was a Christian leader who referred to himself as "the Elder" or "the Old Man." As I've mentioned before, tradition holds that this aged saint was none other than John, the son of Zebedee, who, with his older brother James, had been among Jesus' twelve apostles and one of the inner circle of Jesus' friends along with Simon Peter. This tradition is well-founded as we have the written testimony of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon in the second century that his own teacher, Polycarp, had been a student of John in Ephesus. Irenaeus, one of the earliest Christian theologians who left writings that are still extant, was only, as we say now, three degrees of separation from Jesus, which sounds better to me than six degrees from Kevin Bacon. But I digress...

John has written his letter to someone who might at first seem a bit mysterious. "The elder," he writes, "to the elect lady and her children." Who is this lady? Who are her children? Why is the Old Man writing to them? Well, to begin with and to borrow a stock phrase from the comedians

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of yore, “Sir, that was no lady, that was...” the Church. Or, to be precise, a church; probably one in close vicinity to Ephesus. It was common practice in the culture of that time and place to refer to a city or a group of people collectively as a lady. In times closer to our own, people have expanded this idea to describe nations as motherlands. I think, for example of *la belle France*, from whence many of my forebears hailed, or England, which the character of John of Gaunt describes in William Shakespeare’s “Richard II” as “...This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England, / This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings...” We still use this idea to designate a group dear to us when we speak of our *alma mater*, our “nourishing mother” – the school where our intellectual life was nurtured.

In using this phrase to begin his brief letter, John is following not only the custom of the Hellenistic or Greek-based society of his day but also a traditional Jewish and now Christian view of the relationship between God and God’s people. The prophets Isaiah and, more notoriously, Hosea depict Israel as God’s faithless wife, called back into holy relationship by Yahweh and the prophet. Long before the Christian era, rabbis were interpreting the otherwise rather scandalous book of the Song of Solomon as an allegory about the love God has for Israel, the bride of God. This theme was picked up by Paul in his letter to the church in Ephesus, where John was later based and then, according to tradition, by John himself in the Book of Revelation. The Church as the Bride of Christ would have been an easily understood theme for churches that were in regular correspondence with Ephesus. We are further drawn to this idea when we learn that the Greek word used here for “lady” is the same word used in the salutation of a letter written in 1 B.C. by a man named Hilarion to his wife, Alis.

In addition to reminding his readers of how dearly God loved them by using this image, John may have also been trying to protect them. It is very likely that II John was written during a time when Christians were either under official persecution or at least subject to vigilante violence ignored by those charged with keeping the *Pax Romana*. By not addressing his letter to “the church at so-and-so’s house,” as Paul used to do, or not mentioning anyone by name, John is taking precautions against his letter falling into the wrong hands and being used as a tool to finding and abusing his fellow believers.

But even if we consider the form of the address to be a useful subterfuge, I think that John’s primary motivation was, as always, to remind the Christians to whom he was writing of God’s great love for them. If people know nothing else about John’s first epistle, they know his repeated affirmation that “God is love.” Possibly the best-known verse in the whole New Testament, thanks to signs at sporting events and so forth, is from the Gospel According to John, chapter 3, verse 16: “God so loved the world...” To that ever-present, undergirding theme of love, John adds in these few verses the twin theme of truth.

One of the professors of theology under whom I studied at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary was the late Dr. William L. Hendricks. Just a couple of weeks ago, I discovered that he’d written a slim book on The Letters of John for the old Convention Press, an arm of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board in Nashville back in 1970. I promptly ordered a copy from a used book store and it came in as I was beginning my prolonged preparation for this sermon. He subtitled the book Tapestries of Truth. Here is part of his introduction to II John:

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“Truth and love are the key words which overarch this brief epistle. It takes both! Love without truth is sentiment only. Truth without love is unmotivated knowledge.”

A highly intelligent and sometimes imperious man, Bill and I had a complex and sometimes contentious relationship. On the one hand, I valued his theological insights, as did all of his students, and I appreciated his real love for the arts in general and theatre particularly. For his part, he both encouraged me, allowing me to take one of his doctoral seminars as a humble M.Div. candidate and urging me to pursue the higher degrees of Th.M. and Ph.D. He also held me accountable. He didn't allow me to indulge in sloppy reasoning and if I recall correctly I received one of my lowest grades at Southern in that seminar. On the other hand, while I respected his theological acumen I found him to be a bit of a dilettante artistically. I worked with him on a pilot for a sitcom on the now-long-defunct American Christian Television System (the acronym ACTS was a dead giveaway), a “cutting edge” project of the Southern Baptist Convention back in 1985. His role was a voice-over with a character of either a minor angel or a minor devil, I can't remember now which. He was essentially type-cast for his voice, a booming baritone with a rather prissy enunciation. His performance was pretty flat but he was inordinately pleased with himself. He also made required reading in one of his classes a play he'd written, called “The Harrowing of Hell.” It was pretty bad but he'd wrangled getting it published by Broadman Press, another SBC organ. I've got a personally inscribed and autographed copy in my office so I must not have been too brutal in my review of it to him. But since I'd been working professionally in the theatre for a good eleven years by that point, with the advantage of training from one of the most revered acting teachers in America and working alongside the finest play development staff in the country, I wasn't at all shy about arguing with him when he delivered artistic critique in his rather pontifical manner.

I tell that story in order to reflect on Bill Hendricks' words about love and truth. It does take both! While I would say that Bill generally showed a fine balance of love and truth in his relationship to me, I would say that he was too sentimental about his own artistic work – too much love and not enough truth. He was not particularly open to critique himself, although unsparing of others. On the other hand, I'm sure that he would have claimed that I aired too much unmotivated knowledge – too much truth and not enough love, if indeed he recognized any truth in my critiques.

It's a fine line to walk, the balance of truth and love. This is a truth well known by any spouse who's ever heard those dread words, “Honey, does this outfit make my “fill-in-the-body-part” look too big?” I'd recommend erring on the side of love on that one, by the way. But at some point, truth has to come into balance with love. It's important, for example, to encourage children and beginning students to the arts. When your toddler presents you with a paper on which resides an amorphous blob of paint or ink and inquires if you like his or her doggie, the appropriate answer is “yes, it's a beautiful doggie.” One must resist the instinct to seize the woodwind or stringed instrument from the hands of the beginner and hurl the offending thing from the house. Otherwise we never get to hear the sweetness which years of lessons can produce or see the work of the budding artist. But if, after due diligence, talents are not manifest, that must be lovingly communicated as well. In my previous career, I heard the auditions and saw the portfolios and resumes of hundreds, perhaps thousands of would-be theatrical artists, technicians and administrators. One of the worst parts of that job was to have to look into those

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hopeful young (and sometimes not-so-young) faces and say, as lovingly as I could, “I’m sorry, you don’t have the experience necessary... I’m sorry, you don’t have the qualifications we need...” or, worst of all, “I’m sorry, I don’t think this is your area of giftedness.” But it would have been even worse to have smiled and lied and said, “Oh, you are wonderful” and made up some reason I couldn’t hire or cast them. That would simply have gotten me off the hook and made some other poor *schmo* do the dirty work. I always thought it was better that I do it myself, with as much respect and caring as I could muster. I knew how the message might come from some of my less patient colleagues.

So, as Dr. Hendricks said, “Love without truth is sentiment.” While he characterized truth without love as “unmotivated knowledge,” I might add that truth without love can be cruelty. I’ve been a fan of Paul Simon’s music ever since I heard him singing “The Sound of Silence” with Art Garfunkel in 1966. One of my longtime favorites is his early solo hit, “Tenderness,” from the album “There Goes Rhymin’ Simon.” (Remember record albums? I think I actually had this album originally on an 8-Track cartridge, which really dates me. Anyway...) In the song, Simon pleads with a lover to show a little “tenderness / Beneath your honesty.” “No you don’t have to lie to me,” he croons, “Just give me some tenderness / Beneath your honesty.”

Love and truth; John insists on the importance of both. As I’ve also mentioned before, truth was very much an issue for John as he confronted one of the first Christian heresies of “Docetism.” This was the teaching that Jesus was a spirit-being who only “seemed” to be a human. This, the Docetists taught, was because the divine Son of God would have been “polluted” by becoming human and could not have died on the cross. But John, who had seen Jesus eat and sleep and teach and live and die, knew that this was a lie. He could not let it stand. He knew that teaching based on a lie was poisonous to the Body of Christ.

I think John would call on us, as children of the elect lady that is Good Shepherd Baptist Church, to be on guard against those who lie in the name of Christ. Docetism is no longer the threat to the Body that it was in John’s day but there are other kinds of lies being promulgated from pulpits in our time. There is the lie that we must hate anyone who does not believe exactly as we believe, for example. Mark’s Gospel records that this same John came to Jesus one day with a problem: “John said to him, ‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’ But Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.’” There is the lie that we must hate those of other nationalities and other religions. Jesus held up a hated Samaritan as a model of how to be a true neighbor. There is the lie that church dogma, our version of the Law, is more important than acts of mercy.

In Tapestries of Truth, Bill Hendricks writes, “The Greek word for truth means that which is seen or not hidden. Truth is things as they really are.” This is how John knew that Docetism was not the truth – he had seen Jesus. Today, we use science as a way of “seeing truth” and the Church has denied scientific truths to Her great detriment. In denying the truths discovered by the great scientist Galileo, the Church ruptured the relationship between science and faith. Today, we continue to hear this willful disregard of scientific truth from pulpits as well, whether

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it is denying the age of the Earth in favor of a literal dating of the Bible, or the documented facts of climate change, or the work of leading psychiatrists showing that homosexuality is neither an “intrinsic disorder” nor a willful and sinful choice. We must push back against these untrue teachings as strongly as John did against the teachings that Jesus was only ever a ghost and not a human just like us.

We are often tempted into many kinds of untruths. There are lies of omission, when we simply allow the truth to go unspoken. There are white lies, when we try to preserve someone’s feelings at the expense of the truth. This is the clearest example of what Bill Hendricks would have called dangerous sentimentality. There is the untruth of hypocrisy, of seeming to stand for the truth when we really act to oppose it. There is what we call “sharp dealing” in business, presenting a product as whole and fine when we really know it is not up to par. In most instances, a failure of truth is also a failure of love. If we truly cared about our neighbors, we could not lie to them, either for our advantage or to “spare” them the truth.

Yes, my former professor was right. Where truth and love are concerned, it takes both. This is not simply the message of the shortest book in the Bible but a message the Scriptures teach over and over again. From the time that Adam turned his back on a loving relationship with God in the Garden and then looked to make his wife the scapegoat, another kind of lie, we have seen what follows the abrogation of truth and love. But when truth and love permeate our actions, we discover the abundant life that Jesus promised. Truth and love together lead to life.

My sisters and brothers, we are called to take our pursuit of truth and the truth we already possess and to go out to the world with love. That is how the world will see and will truly know the love of God and be led into life. May God grant us the truth and the love to faithfully serve all of God’s creation that is within our reach. Amen.