

The World Behind Me
1 John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17
May 6, 2018 – Sixth Sunday of Easter

You may remember that last week our sermon concentrated on love. It was entitled “The Image of Love” and I spoke of how that love of God must be within us, because we are created in the image of God, and God is love. I preach about love a lot. I have sometimes asked myself, if I overdo the “love” theme; and then I wonder if it’s possible to overdo the “love” theme. Jesus’ two great commandments were: love God and love your neighbor. In today’s Gospel lesson we read, “I give you these commandments, that you love one another.” Last week’s epistle lesson told us that God is love; and, if you can remember back to the very first sermon I ever preached in this church, July 2011, I said that “ultimately there is only one story in the entire Bible, and that’s the story of God’s love.”

So today, the writer of First John continues. First, we are called to love the children of God. And who are the children of God. I’ve said it dozens of times before: Every person on this planet is a child of God; we were all created in the image of God. And how do we know if we are being loving to the children of God? By loving God and obeying God’s commandments.

Then our writer launches into this interesting polemic between the love of God and the world. He states, “Whoever is born of God conquers the world.” The Common English Bible translation says, “Everyone who is born from God defeats the world.” *Defeats* seems to have a little more of a God versus the world polemic than conquer; and, as you might guess, the original Greek can be read both ways. The word means to conquer, to overcome, to prevail. So what is John saying?

Well, I don’t think he’s suggesting that we all become societal dropouts. We live in the world. We were born in the world. And, indeed I believe, as disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to make a difference in the world, a positive difference. I believe that each of us is called to, in some small way, further the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. And, yes, I believe that we all have the ability to, in some small way, further that kingdom. Who among us, when our days on this earth are accomplished, does not want to leave knowing that the world is a little better place for our having been here?

So what does it mean to conquer the world, or even to defeat the world? I submit that it’s a matter of priorities. And, as disciples of Jesus Christ, I further submit that each of us should ultimately have only one priority - the love of God. That’s what John is saying. If we love God, we will obey God’s commandments. And, if we obey God’s commandments, we will love God’s children, *all* God’s children; and that *will* conquer the world.

Seven years ago, I told you that, while there are many diverse stories in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, but ultimately there is only one story; and that's the story of God's love. Today, I tell you that each of us is called to many tasks. We are called to be parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and friends. We are called to various professions both for the good of society and to earn the necessary income to house and feed and clothe ourselves and our families. Many of us feel called to various hobbies and activities which give us pleasure in our free time. And, of course, many of us are called to membership and service within the church. We do many of these things on a daily basis without consciously considering them a calling. We do many of these things without consciously thinking of them as furthering God's kingdom; and I confess that the same is true for clergy as for lay people. And still... Still, as I read the commandments, I tell you that everything we do should be about furthering God's kingdom. Ultimately, there is only one calling – to share the love of God.

Now, that sharing might not be direct. Someone once said to me, "I love to fish. How is that sharing God's love." I replied, "It is. First of all in your fishing you find relaxation and stress relief. In your fishing you are taking care of the body that God has given you. And I believe we are all called to take care of the gifts God has given us, and our bodies are the greatest of gifts. If we take care of our bodies, we are better able to go forth to serve God by serving the people of God." (As an aside, that's why we're doing The Daniel Plan at this church. First, we need to take care of ourselves.)

But then I said to my inquirer, "Now about your fishing... Have you ever thought about taking a young person, a person that could use an adult mentor, with you when you go fishing? Have you ever thought about how the conversations you might have and the time you might spend could further the love of God that young person might experience; and, oh by the way, one of the ways we experience the love of God is sharing the love of God; and, no I'm not suggesting that you teach a Bible lesson. I'm only suggesting that you show that you care." Fishing is just one example. I invite each of you to fill in your favorite activity.

Friends, either what we do furthers the kingdom of God and the love of God on this earth or it does not. It's either about God or it's about the world; and that's the world that John is speaking of defeating. Our lesson for today concludes by telling us that we conquer the world through faith in Jesus Christ. I've stated before that I am deeply disturbed when people in leadership claim to be Christians and, at least in my opinion, seem to make decisions that are totally contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ as presented in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Either we are furthering the kingdom of God on earth or we are working contrary to that kingdom. We cannot simply set our faith aside and say it

does not apply. I say it again, either we are furthering the kingdom of God on earth or we are working contrary to that kingdom.

Tuesday is Election Day. When I step into the voting booth; I make my decisions based on who will best further the kingdom of God. Yes, we are all human; and, at times politicians in particular need to make some ugly compromises in order to get things done. So far, I have not found the name of Jesus Christ, or for that matter the name of any of the saints on my ballot. But, I still ask myself, who will best further the kingdom. Who on this ballot really cares for the children of God, *all* the children of God; and I invite you to do the same.

I've stated before, that often times, as I'm writing a sermon, a song or hymn will pop into my head. Maybe that's just the way clergy work; or, maybe it's because I'm a musician and I almost always have some piece of music running around the back of my head. We sang this one just a few weeks ago, but we're going to sing it again. It's "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus," but the verse I kept hearing was "The world behind me, the cross before me..."

That's what John is saying... It's time to put the world behind us and look to the cross. It's time to put our faith in Jesus knowing that Jesus will give us the strength to accomplish the tasks that are set before us; and Jesus will show us the way. I have decided to follow Jesus. Will you put the world behind and follow the cross. We have work to do. We have commandments to follow. We have love to share. Let every task that we do, no matter how menial it may seem, ultimately be for the furtherance of God's kingdom, a kingdom of love and joy and peace.

Let us pray. . .

Lord, use me. Use each of us
to further your kingdom upon this earth,
a kingdom of love and joy and peace.
Amen.

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