

Easter 6th Sunday “Burden or Blessing” May 9, 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

The sermon this morning is based upon I John 5:1-8

¹Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. ²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. ⁴For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

⁶This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. ⁷For there are three that testify: ⁸the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree. ⁹

Do you find that your head spins after reading too much John? Many people do. Everyone who believes has been born of God. OK, that makes sense. And everyone who loves the Father loves whatever has been born of him. So, how do you love what has been born of the Father, that is everyone who believes? You love God and his commands? Love them, not just do them, but love them? For the love of God is all about keeping the commandments, and those commandments are not burdensome??? Holy Law of God! How do we do this?

One must ask if we are really talking about the same commandments here? Does that mean if I don't keep the commandments, I am not loving God, and if I am not loving God is that born of my disbelief? And if I am not believing, am I not born of God? No wonder I cannot keep those commandments.

This line of reasoning will result in our despair. But I don't think that is where John wants us to go. Let's take another look at this.

I believe this all hinges on the incarnation. Whoever believes that Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, the human being, is the Son of God, that one, that person is born of God. The denial of the divinity of Jesus or the humanity of Christ, is not born of God. I believe there are really only two options when it comes to lineage in John's view. One is either born of God or of the devil.

If you love the father, you also love his children, and those children would be all those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God. We love those children when we keep the commandments of God. But then it gets all weird on us. The commands are not burdensome. The heck they aren't. Have you tried going an hour without sinning, a day?

But that might not be quite what John has in mind, you see. The commandment to love one another is a relationship command, not a purity command. What I mean by that is that in the Old Testament we are often exhorted to keep all the commandments, laws, statutes, decrees, etc. of the Torah. But when you go in and actually read that Torah, it is mostly about how to restore the broken relationship through the sacrificial system. Loving the brother is not really about keeping all the commandments, but it is about loving the brother. That means remaining in that relationship which God has established.

We will still sin, John has already acknowledged that (I John 1:8-10). But the Christian has a way to deal with that, it's called repentance and forgiveness. That is loving the brother and that is keeping the divine command. This is not some impossible to keep holiness code which lays on us a burden which is impossible to keep, in the same way that the Sermon on the Mount crushes us under its demands. God fulfills those commandments for us through Jesus Christ.

This is the victory that overcomes the world itself: the love expressed in forgiveness. It is not our perfect life which is described, but a perfect solution to our profoundly imperfect lives which is being described here. God's righteousness reigns here. And His righteousness is gifted to us by grace through faith in Jesus Christ's perfect life, death and resurrection for us. So, what is it about believing that Jesus is the Son of God that enables us to overcome the world?

When we believe in Jesus – the sins of our neighbors also change for us. They are already overcome. The world at best would have us understand the sins of others, but it would also understand if we wanted to get even. But that is not overcoming those sins. They are still there.

But Jesus has removed them. When we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, we can look at any evil and know that He is bigger than that evil. That means we can look at the brother who has hurt us, the neighbor, the fellow congregant or the unbeliever down the street, and understand that God has died for that sin as well as ours. And that empowers us to overcome the world. We don't have to get even. We get to forgive the sin. And that is actually much better than getting even. We are the heralds of God's forgiveness, the proclaimers of this truth. We forgive people. That burden is on Jesus, not me. That is why it is not burdensome. He has borne that burden.

The second paragraph is a little easier: it is so sacramental. We know very little about the first century congregations or what their worship was like, but I always conjecture from this that they were profoundly sacramental. We know that they were later on. The Spirit, the water and the blood all testify. To what do they testify? They testify to the real death that Jesus died. The blood and water that ran out of his side is the very blood of the sacrament, the very water of our baptism. Christ has become a real human being to redeem real human beings. For some reason He loves the broken creatures that we have become.

The core of this idea of the work of Christ in our lives, the clearest exposition today, is that forgiveness. Not only because most people don't understand it, but also because it is something which this world needs. It needs communities of congregations that practice forgiveness, real forgiveness, regularly. We are probably all flabbergasted that Jesus' love is for his enemies. We have lots of folks who assert they are our enemies. ISIS and Atheists, BLM and Antifa all want us to go away. But Jesus loved those who pounded the nails and the folks who chanted "crucify!" Christians really have no enemies. Yes, there are those who declare themselves to be our enemy. But the Christian who gloats over the death of these enemies has missed the point. Jesus died even for the folks of whom we are afraid.

When we forgive, Christ's victory over sin is clearly seen in our fellowship and in our lives. We become the living proclamation of Christ's victory. It is not a victory of long ago, but it is a victory over the sins that plague all human lives today.

When we forgive them, we are really plugging into that work of Christ. When we deal with them with the feeble resources of the world, and bear grudges, we are obscuring Christ's victory at best, and at worst, denying it.

We need to see that the culture in which we live has a really messed up way to deal with problems and sins. We have a better way and we need to start living it out. That way is not vengeance or anger, it is not understanding the psychology of the evil doer either, but it is forgiveness. That forgiveness is spoken and applied. It frees both the perpetrator and the one who has been wronged from all sorts of things, including the need to get even. But more importantly it applies the love of God to this very situation we are living in.

This opens the doors for love where sin had shut them tight. This opens the doors to joy when sin's suffering and pain had clamped down upon us. This is the community John envisions in the Gospel and Epistle readings. This is living in the victory of Christ.

Jesus has chosen us, He has appointed us, He has called us friends, not servants, but friends. That cannot change; He who is the very creator of heaven and earth has spoken it. We have been baptized. He abides in us. He promises that. We are the branches connected to the vine. We have touched the very love of God. We taste that love when we drink from that chalice and sink our teeth into that wafer.

Notice that is all very physical stuff, very relational. There is a reason for that. Jesus made this world; all things were made through him. He loves it. He loves every sinner, every rock, every tree, and every breath of air. And so, He comes to us in these things and they along with the Spirit of God testify to a very simple truth: God cares. He sent his Son to die a physical death to redeem this physical world. Today you and I are the manifestations of that real love God has for this world.

This is not just a piece of nice sentiment, either. He means it. When we love with his love, it is potent. He works through us; He loves through us. In fact, this love He has planted in us is the very secret to the power of the universe; it conquers the world itself. Sin is no barrier; Jesus' blood washed that guilt away for us. No hurt is bigger than his healing. No enemy is bigger than his reconciliation. Our whole life is filled with this awesome potentiality.

And when we hold the hand of a person in the hospital and say a prayer, God is in the room, lifting them up to bear this pain, to endure this time of trial. Now, when we confront our adversary, we see not only the hurt he has done, but also the forgiveness which Jesus has wrought. The sin is already forgiven before we ever open our mouths. Now we can see him for what he is. And that serves to cast our whole life in joy. What can trouble us now? Christ has redeemed it all.

Christ, living and loving, makes himself present in our world today to shatter our preconceptions and upend our world. It might not be comfortable, but it is really good thing. He has made himself present in our lives through water applied and body and blood consumed. He is present in the people around us and the blessings showered down upon us. This reality gives us a joy no matter what our lives are going through right now. Even to our dying breath we are in His loving hands. Emmanuel, God with us. We live in that reality.

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide with you to life everlasting. Amen!