

Christ, Spirit, Truth and Love

Ephesians 4:7-16; 1 John 3:24-4:8

Nat and I drove out to the Bruce Peninsula up on Lake Huron Thursday afternoon and spent Friday hiking and just filled our eyes and minds and hearts with all sorts of sights on the cliffs overlooking Georgian Bay. It was not picture perfect scenery we looked at most of the day. The woods we were in would have been wet and moss covered in July and, on Friday, it was grey and ominous and cold and it rained on and off all day. Which I love, because it is on dark, grey days that what is left of the green and orange and yellow and purple and red really shines. The leaves take a phosphorescent glow against the dark moody sky.

And looming behind the dark clouds the entire time for me was this sermon. Normally on these trips, I wake up at around 4 and make a cup of coffee on that little machine they provide in the room. And in the morning twilight, I just write the thing. But this hotel was a deal, much cheaper than what we usually get and there was no coffee machine in the room. What's more, I've been dreading the sermon because John has been repeating himself and this week it will be the commandments again, the anointing again, the antichrist again, love for one another again.

I think I know what the old apostle is up to. He is using corkscrew logic. He is cork-screwing around hitting the same themes over and over again because in many respects what he faced at the end of the first century is not that different than what old men like me having been facing since the end of the 20th century. The realities have all gone a-swim. I grew up in a traditional Irish family whose parents made a brave face at being modern when in fact, all the traditions that had held their lives together came more and more into question every year I got older. Well, I've told that story before and repeating myself was what I was dreading every step I took through the woods.

So, I'm just going to say what it is, and if I can't be interesting, I'll try to be brief. John begins his latest corkscrew in the last verse in chapter 3 of his letter. He repeats to his readers what he has told them a number of times. He writes, "*The one who keeps his commandments abides in Christ and Christ in him.*" He has to turn this circle again because last week, if you remember, he was all but reveling in subjectivity. After reliving the falling out of Cain and Abel, after warning us that sin must turn away from if we want to belong to God, John simplifies obedience to just two commandments about love, each of them given to us by both Moses and Jesus each in their turn.

We must trust Christ and love God and love each other. So turning from sin is not so much a matter of regulating and moderating our habits as it is really trusting Christ, and really loving

God and really, especially, loving each other. So, for me, last week was a subjective week talking about loving God and walking with Christ and sticking with each other enough so that if my heart reaches the sanctuary struggling with the selfishness and impurity and ill-discipline that I still wrestle with, I can hope that the warmth and loyalty I've shown the brothers and sisters at church might convince God to take the larger view and forgive my nonsense for the umpteenth time.

But now, this Sunday, John has corkscrewed back to those pesky commandments that my own heart wishes I could keep better than I do. John writes "*The one who keeps his commandments abides in Christ and Christ in him.*" The point being I think that we can be forgiven for missing commandments, forgiven for struggling with and often failing at the many disciplines and qualities commanded of us by God. But we won't be forgiven for simply letting the commandments go.

In the morning twilight, in my dim, dark, caffeine-less hotel room, I read in Leon Morris that John has been corkscrewing through this whole letter back and forth between that single commandment, that "*new commandment*" Jesus made that we should "*love one another*" and the many, the plural "*commandments*", that ethical code that has always defined God's people since Moses came down Sinai with two stone tablets. Now love trumps all. It is in loving God and loving each other that the rest of the commandments come within our reach. But the ethics taught by Moses and Jesus in the commandments are the substance and the definition of love.

So as fast as I can, I'm going to repeat them, all ten. One: We must worship God and we may only worship God. Two: No idols. We may not fashion a god to our own liking with our hands or minds or hearts. Three: We must be honest and sincere in anything we say to or about God. Can't use his name in vain. Four: We must hold one day a week sacred to God and worship him together on that day. Five: We must honor, venerate our parents, their sins and mistakes notwithstanding. Six: We may not murder, which is to take another's life for any personal, private purpose. Seven: We must love and remain true to the person we marry. Eight: We may not take what belongs to anyone else. Nine: We may not lie to destroy a person's reputation. Ten: No coveting. We must not allow ourselves to even want what belongs to someone else, not people nor things.

And what John is teaching here is that these commandments are the fences and boundaries within which we must will end up if we trust and love and walk with Jesus. Now we'll struggle with and trip over them to be sure. And we can be forgiven for that. But to say we belong to Jesus and to act like what the commandments say about right and wrong and people isn't true or doesn't matter is defy everything Jesus said he came to do. Remember he said in the Sermon on

the Mount, *“Don’t think I’ve come to abolish the Law and the Prophets! I’ve not come to abolish but to fulfill them.”*

And we fulfill the commandments, John tells us, by abiding in Jesus. He writes, *“...we know that he abides in us by his Spirit whom he has given us.”* So now we’ve corkscrewed right back into the subjective, the Spirit, the anointing, the born again, born from above experience, without which, Jesus taught us, none of us will enter the kingdom of heaven. And of course Jesus is right. Even in a dim dark hotel room, I know Jesus is right! The commandments aren’t going to get me there. Unless Christ forgives me, unless his Spirit opens my mind and heart to want what is right no number of commandments is going to keep me headed toward God and away from trouble.

But spiritual guidance is subjective, so John warns us, *“Beloved, don’t believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they’re from God.”* The point being that the far side of the spiritual veil is a busy place, angels and demons and charlatans and counterfeits. But I don’t think this notion of testing the spirits involves anything like a personal interview with any invisible spiritual beings. Because it doesn’t work that way. People are shaped for better or worse by the spiritual influences that their way of life opens them up to. And usually the influences are subtle.

By the time John wrote this letter, he was a long way from his kosher Jewish childhood on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Old Israel had gone up in smoke and ashes, and a new generation of disciples were coming who had been more influenced by Plato and Aristotle than by Moses or even Jesus. So these urban sophisticates were learning a gospel from the church that was more than a little foreign to their ingrained habits of mind. And the gospel paradox they wrestled with was that a Person as exalted as God’s only begotten, Word of the Father now in flesh appearing, that God’s Son could ever have wandered the countryside dressed as a village carpenter, eating and drinking and sweating and sleeping like any other ordinary man.

More to the point, they were used to philosophy, accustomed to belonging to this school or that school of thought. And so what they were tempted to do was to turn Jesus into an abstract spiritual phenomenon, a Buddha-esque mind over matter, attitude over circumstances kind of guru with a gospel way less intrusive and personal than you must be born again, from above, and welcome God’s Spirit to live in your heart and teach you the ethics and disciplines and ideals of an otherworldly kingdom in this world made up of citizens whom you are to love as if they’re your own family.

All this founded by a Man who strangely died on a cross for our sins and rose from the dead to ascend to his Father one day to return in the flesh to judge and to set right by force all the wrongs of the present age.

To the Graeco-Roman mind, this kind of literal intermixing of pristine spiritual realities with flesh and blood people and ordinary historical events was just not the thing. Old man John going on about the Jesus his eyes had seen and his ears had heard and his hands had touched was about as strange to Graeco-Roman thinkers as our singing “There’s Power in the Blood” and holding an altar call might be for people who’ve learned most of what they know from “Ted Talks” on the net. There is power in the blood and most of these people could use an altar call. But they come from a background, they’ve been influenced by spirits, who’ve taught them that the literal flesh and blood gospel facts are strange and uncomfortable and unseemly.

The ethics of Moses and the personal, physical life Jesus lived in the old Promised Land were being obscured by a new doctrine taught by a new sort of teacher that John called “*antichrist*”. Not the great, overarching political tyrant foretold by the Old Testament prophets. One of those, Titus the Roman, had already destroyed old Jerusalem, temple and all. But John foresaw that a new kind of antichrist would arise from the Christian congregations, selling a gospel that was just a half turn off from what Jesus had really taught, who Jesus really was.

The Holy Spirit, through whom Christ abides in our hearts, has taught us one kind of gospel, but there are others spirits on the move, informing and motivating antichrists to lead people away from Christ and Church, commandments and gospel. And the test as to which spirit we should listen to is doctrinal, John tells us: “*By this you know the Spirit of God, every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ, come in the flesh, is from God and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God...*”.

And the point John makes here is that true gospel teaching is always founded on the notion that Jesus is the one and only Person through whom heaven and earth, spiritual and physical, perfect, pristine light and ordinary flesh and blood have been reconciled and integrated. Or, to take it from the other point of view, all false teaching is based on the notion that Jesus wasn’t really here, didn’t really die, didn’t really rise, hasn’t gone to heaven and isn’t going to return to judge the living and the dead.

Christ was a legendary figure, antichrist will tell us, a moral ideal. Therefore, the commandments don’t really apply. God’s Spirit isn’t really in play. The relationships Jesus commanded us to have, the love Jesus commanded us to show isn’t really as central and critical as the gospel holds them up to be. Antichrist would reduce Jesus and his gospel to a vague moral ideal designed to inspire to be better, wiser, more functional people in our own right.

But Jesus as a philosopher and the Church as a school of thought offers us nothing like the invasive, personal encounter with God and with each other that Jesus and the apostles taught us to seek each in their turn. And the point of John's warning is not that we should be afraid of some trap door error in thinking that could put us in the wrong with God and each other. If the gospel is real and the Spirit is in play as Jesus taught, then it will not be as easy for us to fall away as we might fear.

John writes to us, "*You are from God, little children, and you have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.*" In other words, at the end of the day, if we have given our lives to Christ and believed in his gospel and welcomed his Spirit to come and live in our hearts, then God himself will preserve us from teachers and teaching that is a half turn off from that Spirit and light, flesh and blood, real life obedience that Jesus called us to practice.

God will get us there if it is God we really want. The worldly sophisticates with their vague mind over matter, attitude over circumstance regime will look and sound grand in the short run even though they won't give Christ his due. But at the end of the day it is the gospel the apostles taught that will preserve us as belonging to God and each other. "*We are from God.*" John wrote about himself and the other apostles, "*he who knows God listens to us...*". And the proof of whether we have listened to God is whether we love each other in church.