

Gospel Paths to Human Hearts

Psalm 78:1-8; 1 John 2:12-17

For me, personally, this has been a summer of milestones. In May, our youngest daughter graduated from college. In July, our church marked its two hundredth anniversary. In a week or two, on the Thursday before the Derby Fair, it will be 22 years since Nat and I moved into the manse with two little boys and a baby girl the Thursday before the Derby Fair in 1996. So this time around in John's first letter, I can't help but feel a kinship with the old apostle who once upon a time had been the youngest of Jesus' disciples, the Savior's pet, but now as an old man, John is watching the movement Jesus founded turn the corner toward the end of its first century.

For some fifty years, John had traveled around the eastern Mediterranean telling breathless stories of what it had been like to hear Jesus' voice, to see him as he was and read the expression on his face, to touch and be touched by God the Son who had become a man, a carpenter's step-son from a hill town in Galilee. And now near the end of the first Christian century, as John takes up his pen, he can see in his mind's eye, the three generations of Christian disciples who had arisen in the fifty years since John had seen Jesus last.

So he begins our passage this morning, addressing the youngest, newest generation, the grandchildren of the first disciples, who like so many of our children were born in the '80's and '90's of that century and who would live out their lives in a completely different world than what John had known, working in his father's boat on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus found him. "*I write to you, little children,*" John begins, "*because your sins have been forgiven for his name's sake.*" The name in question here is Jesus and the first thing that even a child can know about Christ is that he is the one God sent to the cross so that we can be forgiven for all that we do wrong.

Which is hardly news here at First Church, we say it all the time and it's not that complicated. But seeing Christ on the cross for our sins is the first step toward anything else we will ever know or grasp about God. There's no reason to come to church on Sundays, no reason to love the people at church, no reason to learn a gospel ourselves or share a gospel with others, unless we first take to heart the notion that something has gone wrong inside us that only God can forgive and heal. So it follows that a child who learns early about sin and begins early to look to God for forgiveness has learnt a lesson that will hold him on the straight and narrow all the way to heaven.

So the children of the early Christians had begun to learn forgiveness. And so next in this letter John writes to his generation, his old friends, who had first found Jesus back when the gospel

was new. John says to them: *“I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who was from the beginning.”* I think John is expressing here a sort of double entendre. The people he calls *“fathers”* among the early Christian congregations were the disciples who had learned their gospel from the disciples, the ones from Galilee who had known Jesus in the flesh.

John addresses them as *“fathers”*, men who had stuck with Christ and church through all the fifty years of twists and turns and upset and danger it had taken for the church to get on her feet. This first generation had seen the apostles martyred, they had seen old Israel overrun and old Jerusalem burnt to the ground. Many of them were Jews who’d been disowned by their families and banished from their livelihoods for believing that Jesus was the Messiah and that the new Christian congregations were God’s new people. And John had one thing to say about his own generation.

They still *“knew”* God, they were still at it fifty years later, near the end of their own lives. Long after their youth and strength were spent, they still loved and followed and knew the Savior who’d won their hearts at the *“beginning”* of it all. Which is a double entendre because it is God himself who is really *“from the beginning”*. God has stuck with all of us from the very dawn of our history. And the point here is that to persevere with Someone you love is Godlike. God has persevered with us from beginning to end and if we really know him we’ll do the same.

The third and last generation John addresses are the *“young men”*. They’re not children, not old, but men in the prime of their lives, at the height of the powers. And John says to them, *“I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one.”* And the point here is that there is a world of temptation, a whole menu of distractions that Satan launches at people in the prime of their lives to keep them from taking to heart that they need to be forgiven and led by a God. Because when we’re young and strong and beautiful and capable, it is easy to be blind to what’s bent and broken and needy inside us. So we don’t make like children, knowing we need help, looking for a Father, kind enough to forgive, strong enough to save.

If you read along with me, you may have noticed that what John writes here about children and fathers and young men is set out in your Bibles in verse. I think because the parade of the first Christian generations out toward the heaven has set John thinking in terms of old Israel ascending Mt. Zion for one of the old holidays. The Israelites always sang on their way to God, as they carried their children and led their elderly into the sanctuary. And this new song John composes has sort of a Doppler effect as he imagines God’s people streaming by him and heading into the future.

The first stanza was in the present tense, but now, as they move past him into a future where he will not be with, John switches into the perfect tense. He sings to God’s people from the past. So

the second stanza starts, *“I have written you, little children, because you have known the Father”*. In other words, as John pictures them marching away from him into the future, he can see that the little ones have made progress. Not only are they forgiven, not only can they sing “Jesus Loves Me”, but they have taken the Almighty for their own, begun to know him as a real Father. The point being that children take to heart what often escapes us.

Once more John addresses the *“fathers”* among the early Christians. They are on their last legs here on earth. Soon they will be the apostles will be watching the parade from heaven, but for now John repeats his description of them, repeating his first stanza this time in the past tense. *“I have written to you, fathers, who have known him who is from the beginning.”* Because what *“fathers”*, older Christians, lend to God’s people is experience, the conviction that God can be trusted over time.

When I arrived here there people in this room who had worshiped here since before the Second World War. They hung on through all kinds of circumstances but their presence here tells the tale that God can be trusted to be faithful over time and the trick for us is to hold on and be faithful ourselves. Finally, John addresses the *“young men”* once more as they hurry by him into the future.

“I have written you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.” They’re strong, he repeats. Youth and beauty and strength and ability are formidable qualities while they last. But they’re of no use in God’s kingdom, they lend little to a church unless the hearts and minds of the young and strong are guided and tempered by *“the word of God”*. Because it’s entirely possible to stage a fine event, to run an impressive program, to wow any number of people and have no lasting effect on people’s hearts and minds because we ourselves won’t open our Bibles and learn from God what we’re playing at.

Three things the young men in the early church had going for them. They were *“strong”*, they had the strength of youth. The *“Word of God abided”* in them. They’d been taught by the best and they took their gospel to heart. But first and last John sings to them that they had *“overcome the evil one”*. John sings about their victory over temptations and distractions and Satan as an already accomplished fact, even though Jesus warned Peter at the Last Supper that Satan wanted to sift him, even though Paul wrote in his letters that *“we wrestle not against flesh and blood and against spiritual forces of darkness in the heavenly places”*. The point here is not that the young and strong won’t face temptation and trouble if they try to serve Christ, they will. The point is that once we throw in with Christ at any stage of life, Satan can’t have us!

What did Jesus say about the sheep that belong to him and his Father in John's gospel. "*No one will snatch them from my hand!*" Satan is a fierce, loud, clever enemy. He has a hold in our society today that I never thought he'd be able to get. To take the devil lightly is to be a fool. But when it comes to the souls of those who have truly, really thrown in with Christ, Satan has ultimately lost. He can't have us, he won't get us and so we have overcome him finally and ultimately. And it pays to remember that fact when life gets dark and sin seems overwhelming and irresistible. Sin may trip us from time to time, but keep trust Christ to be our shepherd and we'll be free of it.

Jesus said, "*All that the Father gives me will come to me and the one who comes to me, I will never, ever cast out.*" One more point and I will wrap this up. The children John's sings to in his little song of the generations, their gender is indeterminate. But for the fathers and the young men, John uses vocabulary that is particularly male. He has old men and young men in view as he sings about passing the gospel torch down the generations and into a future where Jesus will return.

And I think that the reason he sings to fathers and young men is that they're indispensable to the future of the kingdom. We need to remember that one of the consequences of the Fall was that God's original design for men and women to work together as one to turn the world into a garden-sanctuary broke. God said to the woman in Genesis 3:16, "*Your desire shall be for your husband, but he shall rule over you.*" I said while we were studying Esther that the desire God spoke of here was not simple affection, but rather a desire to rule. Once they fell, once they were estranged from God, men and women fell into an age old, bitter, relentless struggle to dominate one another.

It's complicated and I can't outline it all but I just want to plant a seed about men and women and family and church here. Things were never the same between men and women once Adam and Eve fell out with God and each other. Do you remember the Pharisees in Matthew 19 who asked Jesus, "*Can we divorce our wives whenever we please?*" And Jesus reminded them that Moses had formalized divorce essentially to protect women from abandonment and destitution in the ancient world. But the heart of Jesus case was that "*in the beginning*", he said, "*it was not like that.*"

Divorce may be necessary now that we're fallen and so many of us are determined to run the table on our spouses, but in the beginning God meant for men and women in marriages and families to be complimentary teams teaching the disciplines of give and take and love to each new generation that comes. I'll leave you with two facts, one statistical and secular, and the second sacred and heavenly.

First, we ought to remember that until the latter decades of the 1800's, some 80 to 90% of children grew up in family owned agricultural businesses where boys were apprenticed largely by their fathers and girls largely by their mothers. It wasn't until the industrial revolution took hold in the early 20th century that it became widespread for fathers to leave their home to make a living and leave the upbringing and education with their women. And a century later, women left the home as well, leaving children to spend most of their hours with professional strangers.

Second, if you study the handful of Bible passages that deal with child rearing, Deuteronomy 6, Ephesians 5 and 6 and a few others, you'll quickly note that God assigns the primary responsibility for the rearing and training of children with their fathers, which had some chance of working in an agricultural world where most people lived on family farms.

My point is that in the last century and a half our patterns of family and relationships between men and women and children have undergone a catastrophic change that we ought to weigh in our minds and hearts when we think about marriage and family and church and society and one of the symptoms is the abdication by men and the banishment of men from the roles and patterns Scripture teaches for them in families and church and society. But in our passage this morning John sings about men as one of the two necessary threads that hold all of life and certainly God's kingdom together.