

Many Antichrists Have Arisen

2 Thessalonians 2:1-10; 1 John 2:15-17

One of my favorite songs as a young man was Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now". I'm not sure that, as a young man, I understood much of what she was singing about, but I've noticed in my own life as I get older, that I am more prone to see clouds and love and all sorts of things from more than one angle. Which makes me smile when I remember that John the Apostle wrote his gospel and his letters as an old man. So the same man who wrote in his gospel that "... *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...*" could turn around in his letter and say to us, "*Do not love the world nor the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.*"

So God loves the world, but somehow we're not supposed to. What does he mean? And I think that at the heart of John's reasoning is the notion that what God loves doesn't necessarily love him back. The world that Jesus entered to love and to save had long been organized around ideas and priorities that will draw us away from God if we ever allow ourselves to love them. Because John's description of what drives people in this world, "*the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes and the boastful pride of life*" was not drawn from the clear blue sky.

In a commentary on John's letter, Leon Morris remembered Eve in the Garden, hungry, she saw that the Serpent's fruit was "*good for food*", wistful, she saw that what God forbade was "*a delight to the eyes*" and, full of herself, she believed the Serpent that the forbidden fruit "*was to be desired to make one wise*". So the hunger, "*the lusts of the flesh*", the wistfulness, "*the lust of the eyes*" and the hubris "*the boastful pride of life*" were the three qualities that led us away from God in the first place. So in this letter John warns the early Christians and us not to love what God forbids.

And we said last week that the point here is not that we should be cold hearted, without affection, but rather, taking Christ as our first love, we must channel our affections along those covenants God laid out for us, God first in worship and service, spouses and family second, Christian brothers and sisters third, neighbors and strangers and even enemies, we should love, all in their turn, but always on God's terms, always according to what the gospel teaches is right and true and first.

And the point here is that the world can offer some pretty thrilling and dazzling and even high minded notions that fly against what God has called us to be and do. And in those instances we need to love God first and best and not love the world, not become the unbelievers that God sent

us here to reach, but to remain different enough, holy enough, humble enough that the people we deal with would be influenced to head toward God and not away from him. Because in John's lifetime the world had taken a fateful turn toward Judgment Day.

Which is why John goes on to warn his readers, "*Children, it is the last hour! And just as you have heard that antichrist is coming, even now, many antichrists have arisen! By this we know that it is the last hour.*" And one of the things we ought to note is how different what John teaches here is from what Paul wrote in our Call to Worship some twenty or thirty years before John took up his pen. Paul's letters to the Thessalonians were written early in the game, while most of the apostles were still alive, while old Israel was still there and old Jerusalem was still standing.

But the young Thessalonian congregation was all in a fever because someone had started a rumor that Christ had already returned and so some of the new Christians had left their jobs and begun to live on their savings and they'd begun to act as if ordinary daily habits and disciplines were no longer a thing.

And Paul's response was to write them and say, "*Don't you remember what I said when I was with you?*" Because Paul had taught them what Jesus himself had prophesied in Jerusalem just days before he was crucified, that within a generation a man Jesus called "*the abomination of desolation*", Paul called him "*the man of lawlessness*", that this man would stand "*in the holy place*" and put an end to old Israel. And Paul's point was that in his day none of that had happened yet so it was crazy to think that Jesus had already returned. "Wait for the antichrist!", Paul wrote in so many words.

But now, some decades later, John writes in his letter that all that has changed. Because after Paul's death, an antichrist did appear, Titus the Roman. And, in AD 70, Titus did stand in the Jerusalem temple and declare an end to the Old Testament Commonwealth that had existed in the Promised Land most of the 1400 years between Moses and Christ. So John's readers had seen an antichrist and the end of old Israel and for them the burning question was, "What's next?"

"*Children,*" John writes, "*it is the last hour! Just as you have heard that antichrist is coming, even now, many antichrists have arisen, by this we know it is the last hour.*" So John's point is that his readers are in an entirely different situation than Paul's readers were only a few decades earlier. John's readers have seen an antichrist, Jerusalem has gone up in smoke, old Israel is gone from the land which means that history has rounded its last corner and ever since humanity has been headed down that final stretch whose finish line will be Judgment Day and the return of Christ.

“How do we know?” John asks and answers: “...*many antichrists have arisen...*”. Which is puzzling because Daniel and Jesus and Paul had spoken of the antichrist as an single individual, a single, immensely powerful tyrant from the unbelieving world who would descend on God’s people and wreak havoc on them at the dawn and the closing of the last days. But soon John would have his own vision of the last days in Revelation 13 in which two different kinds of antichrists would arise.

The first was a beast that in John’s Revelation vision rose from the sea. So here was the same sort of antichrist that Daniel and Jesus and Paul had talked about before, an individual pagan tyrant who will persecute God’s people everywhere he finds them till Christ himself returns to take the beast down.

But John’s vision also included a second antichrist, a beast who arises from the land, from God’s people, and becomes a propagandist for everything wrong. This beast, this second kind of antichrist, is a charmer and a con-artist so compelling that people will volunteer to give up their freedom of thought, their economic rights, all to leap on his bandwagon over and against God’s people and everything that the gospel teaches is right and true. No need to bother with those silly outmoded commandments. We can redefine what’s right or wrong or true according to our own fancies and live as we please.

And it’s this kind of antichrist that John is warning will fill the landscape in the last days like dandelions fill a pasture if no one’s of a mind to weed them out. “*They went out from us,*” John warns God’s people, “*but they were not of us. Because if they were of us, they would have abided with us.*” The point being that there is a kind of antichrist that arises, not from pagan unbelievers but from God’s own people. “*They went out from us...*”, John tells us.

And the point here is not that anyone who leaves one congregation for another is an antichrist. The “*us*” John refers to here are the apostles and those congregations in the ancient world who held to the gospel that they first heard from the apostles of Jesus. So these antichrists weren’t leaving one Christian congregation for another, they were leaving the apostles, the true gospel for some other kind of gospel that Jesus never taught. John goes on to make it clear. “*Who is the liar,*” John writes, “*if not the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist who denies the Father and the Son.*”

And this is a feature of the gospel that people have been tempted to miss in all the centuries since John first wrote and antichrists first started popping up all over the landscape. We want to think that the gospel is mostly about us, what we should do, how we should live, what changes can we make to set life straight.

When in fact most good gospel teaching is about Christ, who he is, what he's done, and how knowing and loving him will change our thinking, feeling and doing. The first and worst mistake we can make in learning and teaching a gospel is to fail to give Jesus, God the Son in human flesh, the central place the Bible gives him from Genesis all the way to Revelation. But how quickly we tire of a story in which we are not the heroes who make our own destiny!

"No one who denies the Son has the Father.", John writes. In the Upper Room at the Last Supper, with some measure of sorrow, Jesus sought to prepare his disciples for a future in which he would not be physically, visibly present. *"Don't let your hearts be troubled!"*, Jesus told them, *"Trust in God, trust also in me. I go to prepare a place for you... You know the way to the place where I'm going!"*

"No we don't!", doubting Thomas said in so many words, "You haven't laid any road maps on the table. How will we find the way if you disappear on us?" *"I am the way,"* Jesus answered, *"the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me. If you had known me, you'd have known my Father as well. From now on you do know him and have seen him."*

The point being that it is an antichrist who will offer us a road map, some amazing secret that will make us the master of our circumstances, some amazing technique or ritual or experience that makes us independently wise and powerful and happy. What Jesus is offering us, by way of contrast is himself. He is the way. We need to want him, be curious about him, committed to him with the sort of dogged repetition that makes any love relationship work. We need to gain forgiveness from him on an ongoing basis,. Only then will we ever love and forgive each other in ongoing relationships.

Because together, we're his bride. We're called to seek his presence together, to listen to his commandments and to pray and worship according to the schedule he sets for us. Once every seven days as a bare minimum, not once a month or when the mood strikes us and the so-called spirit moves us. *"if you love me",* Jesus taught in John's gospel, *"you will keep my commandments."*

The gospel calls us to learn and keep his words together, to study our Bibles together as if it were an ongoing conversation with the common Love of our lives which is what Bible Study really is if only we had ears to hear and eyes to see and hearts to care. Because heart love causes us to want to be closer to the Person we say we love. Who belongs to a family and never shows up for a family meal? Miss enough family meals and eventually you become something less than family.

A child knows that! What John is teaching in this passage this morning, salvation, eternal life, is personal. It grows from trusting Christ personally, allowing him to love and forgive us and to teach us a way of life based on our loving him back, wanting him enough to make room for him and his people in our hearts and lives and schedules. Which only works when the heart engages first.

That's why the commandments, true and brilliant though they are, will never save our souls. Because only love and gratitude taken to heart will ever lead us to want a commandment. That's why true gospel teaching is always centered on the goodness and faithfulness and trustworthiness of Jesus. *"Who is the liar if not the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?"* John asks us this morning. *"Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also."* John concludes.

There is a riptide coursing through our society today. There are a million channels through which antichrists are teaching that we can do what we want, when we want, as much as we want, for as long as we want. But Jesus has taught by word and by example that true love tells a different story. When we love God or really anyone we learn to say along with Jesus, *"Not my will, but yours be done."* Not because always love what God commands us to do, but we love God and love each other. It's personal and it starts with knowing and loving and wanting Jesus enough to come to the family table at church.