

The Essential Fact: Christ...in the Flesh

1 Peter 4:7-11; 1 John 3:18-4:3

You can't read these words that old man John, the last apostle standing, wrote some fifty years after he saw Jesus ascend into heaven, you can't read John's words without being impressed by the weight John places on how we act with and toward each other. Not that John is blind to the heavenly majesty inherent in the Christian gospel. In John, more than any of the other gospels, Jesus is described as a visitor from heaven, a traveler from eternity past.

You could never read a Trim the Tree story based on John's gospel, because in John's gospel, there is no stall full of animals, no manger with a Christ-child blinking out at shepherds and angels and farm animals. John's gospel has no baby, crying out to be fed or held or rocked to sleep. Nothing that quaint or sweet from John! To the contrary, John's gospel begins: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. This one was in the beginning with God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father...*". The words are almost designed to intimidate!

But think about it! For a man who begins his letter so ominously, "*...God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in ... darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth...*", for a man with such a high flown view of who Christ is and what we must be to belong to him, John goes on to teach us a way of life that is remarkably simple and forthright.

We read last week, "*...if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, but does not open his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him?*" John had already said, "*By this we know love...Christ laid down his life for us, and we should lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters.*" Not in the sense that many of us would have to literally lay down our lives and die for someone.

But rather in the sense that God has given all of us something, stuff, "*the world's goods*", John writes. God has given us energy, warmth and affection, time. We all have something and the test as to whether we really believe God loves us is whether we dare to give it away. So our passage starts this morning, "*Little children, let us not love in word and talk, but...deed and truth.*" The point being that God is less impressed with faith that is high flown, and dramatic and glorious, and more impressed with the simple, costly generosity that flows from an open heart.

He goes on, “*By this [by how we love] we know we’re of the truth, and we persuade our heart before him in whatever our heart condemns us. For God is greater than our heart and he knows all things.*” The point being that God is glorious and high flown and beyond our reach, but at the same time he’s simple and forthright in what he wants from us. He wants us to share with each other the stuff that we so badly need from him, love and forgiveness when we’re bent and broken, and the stuff, those things, whatever they are, that make us feel warm and safe and cared for.

God wants us to give those things away. It follows that the simple discipline of giving to others what we so often long for and need actually opens our hearts so that God can help us when we need stuff from him. Which has meant a lot to me as I’ve grown older, because, through the years, I’ve wrestled with all this light and glory and truth and purity that John associates with belonging to Jesus.

I’ve read this stuff many times and, as often as not, my heart knows that I’m a long way from any of it. And it’s then, when my own heart might condemn me, that the brothers and sisters around me in church, people to whom I can give and people who give to me somehow get across to me that, however my heart may feel at a given moment, I’m not a hopeless case. So John goes on, “*And if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God, and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.*” And we read about this relationship between the love we show when we’re with each other and the traction we get with God in prayer in our Call to Worship from Peter ‘s first letter.

Like John, Peter starts with the high flown stuff, he writes, “*The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober minded...for the sake of your prayers!*”, he says. But, going on, Peter like John winds up talking about love in church, “*Above all,*” Peter says, “*love one another earnestly,*” because, he says, “*love covers a multitude of sins.*” And the point, I think, is nuchthe same with Peter and John both. After all, how much self-control and sober mindedness will we need to confront “*the end of all things*”? The answer to my mind is: “Probably more self-control and sober mindedness than I can manage.”

But if we love one another, if we stick together against the gloom and doom, we learn the art of finding and giving love and forgiveness when we struggle at self-control and sober mindedness. “*Love covers a multitude of sins.*”, Peter taught us. By learning and practicing love, John taught us, “*...we can persuade our hearts before him in whatever our hearts condemn us...*” The point being that light and glory and truth and purity are not qualities that any of us can find or learn by our lonesome.

To really know God, to really digest both the holiness he demands and the grace he offers, we need the warmth and encouragement, and feedback and accountability that can only be found

from the brothers and sisters at church. But when we take the field together, when we have each other's back, then our prayers take on a sort boldness and confidence that none of us could attain alone. "...whatever we ask," John writes, "*we receive from him because we keep his commandments and we do what pleases him.*" Note that the pronoun here is first person plural throughout.

It is by seeking God together, working through things together that we learn to trust God for the things we bring to him in prayer. Because there's no denying that the commandments are detailed and complicated. Certain things are taboo. Grand larceny is out of the question. On the other hand, telling the truth and keeping the faith and minding our covenants and so on and so on, those things are all mandatory. But John boils the commandments down to two simple, forthright notions: first, "*that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ,*" and second that we "*love one another.*"

Now this notion of believing in a name meant more in the ancient world than we might imagine today. Government in the ancient world was essentially a family business. Rome was ruled by the Caesar's. Through much of John's life, large stretches of the Promised Land were ruled by the Herod's. So to believe in, to identify with someone's name was to take that person as lord and ruler, to devote one's loyalty and resources to the building of his kingdom. To take a king in the ancient world, to subscribe to his family name obligated a person to love that king.

So what John holds up as a first commandment "*that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ*" is as much the same as what Moses taught about the Lord as Israel's king, that we should love Jesus first, heart, soul, mind and strength. And just behind that comes the obligation to "*love each other*", "*to love your neighbor*" as Moses put it. Now like any other kingdom, the other commandments still exist with all their details, but it all begins to sort out once we love the king first.

Jesus put it this way, he said: "*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these other things shall be added to you.*" In other words, if you take the king's name you live by his ideology, you love who the king loves, and you trust the king to guide and lead you through whatever consequences those choices entail. So Peter on the first Pentecost preached to his Jewish friends and neighbors, "*Save yourselves from this crooked generation!*"

When we read that at Joshua's Men this month, it gave us pause. What did Peter mean? That they should hate all Jews? That they should withdraw from society? Of course not! Because we read in the book of Acts that the disciples in Jerusalem loved the people around them just as Jesus had in his turn. They respected the rabbi's and priests.

The Jerusalem Christians worshiped on the Temple porch with the Israelites for as long as they were allowed to do that. But they made no bones that Jesus, the man Israel had crucified was their king and they would live as he taught and would love one another first. So Peter wasn't saying "Withdraw from everything and everyone who didn't take Jesus as Lord." He was saying, "Pick a team. Choose a way of life. Love who you can as much as you can, for as long as you can, but don't be led away from Christ and church by anybody."

John concludes our passage this morning, "*Whoever keeps his commandments abides in Christ and Christ in him. And by this we know that Christ abides in us, by his Spirit whom he gave us.*" The point being that Christ's presence in our hearts is marked by features that are both tangible and intangible. Our love for Christ can be measured, visibly, by where we wind up on Sunday morning, by who and what we have time for, by whether we stay in the boundaries and keep the commitments God has set for us or wander where we please, doing whatever we want.

And there are intangibles, that only God's Spirit can work in our hearts. Whether we long for God's presence day in and day out, whether our heart ever softens and bends to what he holds dear, whether we make time and place in our lives for each other, the people Jesus commanded us to love first. The state of our heart is not always visible to the people around us, but God knows and his Spirit will often come knocking, looking for people with eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to care.

But John warns us, "*...don't believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*" In the ancient world, people associated ideologies, the things we believe in our hearts, with intangible spiritual activity, angels and demons who speak to us from beyond the veil. And the point John is making here is that the notions that rise up in our own hearts and minds need to be tested by something more objective than our own thoughts and feelings. We need family and church and Bible in our lives to keep our thoughts and feelings in balance.

John goes on, "*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ, come in the flesh is from God. Every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God...*". The problem John is addressing here is the notion that religion should be taken as something immaterial.

In the ancient world and still today, there are people who will tell us that what we read in Scripture cannot and should not be applied directly to the tasks and events and relationships of our daily lives in the material world. That we need not believe that Jesus was born of a virgin or executed on a crossbeam or that he rose from a tomb to become a king whose principles and commands personal presence should guide our daily lives. To the contrary, these are legends

meant to encourage and inspire us to hope for something better than our daily experiences will ever provide us.

But John's whole life was founded on just the opposite presumption. Jesus was a man John met on a Galilee beach, who sweat and shivered and hungered and thirsted just like any other man. And yet somehow in the course of living this very material, very physical life, Jesus gave evidence of being someone entirely above and beyond any other person who ever walked the earth. And so John saw him and heard him and touch him with his hands, yet still believe that this Jesus had been with the Father when the universe was being made.

And the whole point of the experience was for the early disciples and for us to believe that our ordinary experiences and relationships can become infused with glory from heaven. And the question becomes how to do it safely. And for this week it will suffice to say that to confront light and glory and truth and purity safely, we must do it together in the company as brothers and sisters in family and church. For our faith to be truly heavenly it must also be grounded in the ordinary world. Because that's the world where Jesus came to save us.