

09 May 2021, The 6th Sunday of Easter: I John 5:1-6

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.

When reading the Gospel of John, it would not be surprising to conclude that John is something of a dreamer, a speculative theologian living in an ivory tower. When reading the Revelation to John, one might conclude he is a head-case. However, in his letters, we see a down-to-earth, pragmatic writer. We might even call him, “John the Practical.” In 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John we see theory applied.

Consider the first sentence just quoted: *Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.* It could hardly be more straightforward and practical—if one believes Jesus is ‘born of God,’ then you will at least want to love others because in and through Jesus we are all born of God. As John writes in his Gospel, Chapter 1, verses 12 and 13: *...to all who received him, who believed in his Name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.* The link between loving God, obeying Christ’s commandments, and loving the sisters and brothers is indissoluble.

John was surely aware of two related, perennial dangers: the first is separating belief and practice. This is mostly unconscious. As an example, we know we are to love enemies—if I accept ‘loving enemies,’ as desirable, even admirable, but in practice impossible, I have put my assumptions about who I and others are and what human beings are capable of above the power of God to change humanity, including myself. I assume the strength of God’s love to change humanity is limited.

It is one thing to think, I will not love my enemies—a conscious choice to spurn God’s commandment—but it is another to believe God cannot bring you to love, even your enemies. Are you more powerful than God? This is not a rhetorical question.

The second danger, rationalization, is related to the first. However, rationalization is very conscious. In this case, we use our reason to do what we want rather than what God clearly calls us to do. We think, act, speak as if our idea of ‘best’ is better than God’s obvious revelation of best; what is ‘best’ for me takes precedent over God’s view of what is best for all. Sometimes we know God’s desires but rationalize that God will be ‘reasonable,’ take account of ‘human nature,’ simply excuse us. At its most perverse, we rationalize that we are ‘special,’ exempt from what is meant to guide others. Are you and I wiser than God? As with the first danger, the question is not rhetorical.

Just as the two dangers are related, the antidotes are also related. The antidote for disconnecting practice from faith is surrender. If God is all-wise, all-powerful, merciful, loving-kind and will convert us into the measure of the full stature of Christ, then one’s own assumptions about human nature, and one’s own potential must give way. You may, at any given moment, at many moments, be incapable of loving your enemies or living any of Christ’s desires. But you and I falling short of God’s will at one moment does not nullify God’s command or make God’s power at work in us impotent.

The antidote for rationalizing is humility founded on the truth that ‘faith’ is a verb. C.S. Lewis wrote that the unexpected strategy of evil is to encourage us to believe whatever we wish so long as we do not act upon it. If faith is a set of principles without practical application, the Enemy of our soul rejoices. We can get it backwards: we can imagine that good thoughts and a right outlook will ‘automatically’ lead us to do what is right. We assume our bodies are servants of our minds; more often the mind is slave to the body. It is counter-intuitive, but the general rule is: Do what is right, and our minds, our feelings will follow.

One last piece of the puzzle: “We do not become holy all at once.” Remember this: our sins and failures hinder us only if we refuse to recognize and give them to God. Our fumbling and muddles reveal our weaknesses, weaknesses God longs to enfold in love—repeatedly, continuously, without condemnation. One of the greatest expressions of faith is your patience, forbearance, and perseverance with yourself and others.

John ends the passage with a rhetorical question: *Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?* Here is a good question to ask, every day. It is only answered by the way we live, every day.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.