

Sermon for Zion, June 21, 2020 – The Letters of John part 2

Hymns: 740 – Make Me A Channel; 730 - O For A World

Scripture: 1 John 2:1-11

Sermon Title: Walking in Darkness

*My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

*We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.*

*Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.*

*Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.*

“Black Lives Matter.” If you’ve listened to the radio or watched TV or read the paper or turned on a computer these last weeks, you’ve seen and heard and read these words. Sparked by the last straw of the heartless killing of George Floyd, protests have erupted in cities across the U.S., and around the world. Even our own Charlottetown, far removed from the triggering event but beset nonetheless with some of the root problems, had several marches and gatherings of its own, which, thank God, were not marred by the violence and looting which so sadly and needlessly devalued the message in some other locations.

Despite our hopes, Canada is not immune to the systemic racism which plagues much of our world. While many of us may not see it as starkly as in other lands, a discussion of any length with members of our First Nations communities, or with people of any readily identifiable ethnic group other than the majority, will tell you so. As part of a family which immigrated to Canada from Germany, even my parents,

brother, sister and I experienced cultural racism, all the way from name calling, to neighbors shunning us, to beatings in the school yard, and for my father, employment opportunities taken away, by those who refused to work for a German in management above them. With the benefit of hindsight, I can understand these resentments against us, as the Second World War was still a fresh memory, but as a child being repeatedly spanked by one teacher, violently shaken by another, or pointed out by a teacher in a school assembly as being of the nationality responsible for the Holocaust, hindsight wasn't a tool I could draw upon for comfort.

These early traumas nonetheless helped me to more readily sympathise with the stories of others experiencing prejudice or racism of any kind. This is true of the rest of my family as well. One of my proudest moments was at my father's funeral, when a young gentleman from Pakistan approached me. He worked for my father at Alcan as a mechanic. He told me how my father made a point of coming out of his office and sitting with him in the lunchroom, when others made a point of staying away. "Why do you sit with me?" he asked my father. "Because you're a good mechanic," he answered, "and because I often sat alone." I learned only recently that another man who worked with my father, and who had several times come to our home, was a Mohawk. My father, despite speaking of him often, never referred to him by race, or by nickname – only by his given name. I am grateful for this example. It shaped me.

There is another who benefitted from an example. His name is John, and we are reading one of his letters today. And the example from which he learned was that of Jesus – the greatest example, and the example set for us all.

You see, John, despite later writing with great skill and eloquence, was a fisherman when Jesus called him from his nets, to follow him, all those years before. John possessed all the prejudices inherent in his countrymen of the day – he hated the Romans, was deeply suspicious of any foreigner, considered women not worth talking to, and had a special inherited grudge against the Samaritans. But Jesus was burdened by none of these hatreds, suspicions, resentments. Jesus viewed all people as children of one father – of his Father.

And so John was shocked when Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion, remarking that this Roman had greater faith than anyone in all Israel. And John was shocked when Jesus spoke in his own home town of how God, in the past, showed special favour to foreigners – a sermon which got Jesus thrown out of Nazareth for

good. And John was shocked when Jesus was approached by a Syro-Phoenician woman – A woman! And a foreigner at that! – who begged Jesus to heal her ailing daughter. Jesus, playing on the prejudices of the disciples accompanying him, said to the woman, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs” (Dogs, you see, is what foreigners were called in those days. And it wasn’t a term of affection). But undaunted, the woman replied, “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” And for this answer, and for her faith, the woman’s daughter was healed.

And John was shocked when Jesus took time to speak with another woman – a Samaritan woman at that – so shocked that he records, in his own Gospel, how surprised the disciples were to find Jesus doing so. Why waste your time talking to a woman, John doubtless thought. You may as well talk to the cat. And a Samaritan woman at that! But Jesus did.

The Samaritans, you see, were a sore point for the Jewish people. Jews considered Samaritans as intruders, taking jobs and land which properly, Jews thought, belonged to Jews. The hatred ran deep. So much so that when a Samaritan village was not receptive to the Gospel, we read in the Gospel of Luke, *When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them.* Note we read this in the Gospel of Luke; John was probably too ashamed to record it in his own. It is likely because of this outburst that Jesus gave the brothers James and John the nickname, “Sons of Thunder.”

Jesus persisted in extending his message of God’s love and the coming Kingdom well beyond the borders of Jewish Judea and Galilee. That love and Kingdom was for everyone, he said. We read throughout the Gospels of his ministry to the people of the Decapolis, an area on the east side of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan settled by Romans, Greeks and others. And the final instructions of Jesus to the Apostles was to make disciples “of all nations;” to be His witnesses in “Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria (Samaria!), and the ends of the earth.” Jews and Gentiles together.

And when, soon after these words, the Holy Spirit came upon the gathered community of believers on the Day of Pentecost, they found themselves praising God in other languages – Luke lists the languages of the Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and

Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene (from where Simon Niger, who carried Jesus' cross, hailed); visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – the list covers more or less all the nationalities and languages of the known world back then. That's who the Gospel is for. Everyone. That's how far the love of God extends.

The early church took this to heart. We have the example of Philip, who, we are told, took Jesus at his word, and travelled to Samaria, where the Gospel was received with great power (Acts 8:4-8). This same Philip was instructed by an angel to meet with an Ethiopian government official, a Eunuch no less, and to share the Gospel with him. The Ethiopian was baptised on the spot (Acts 8:26-40). Ethiopian Christianity, among the world's most ancient, traces its roots back to this very moment, and to the Apostle Matthew, who ministered there, and to Mark of the Gospel of Mark fame, who also spread the word into Egypt. Christians in India trace their Faith back to missionary efforts by the Apostle Thomas. And the list goes on.

The Apostle Paul carried this multinational impetus throughout Asia Minor, which we know as Turkey, and into Europe as well – deep into Macedonia and Greece. He and Peter together ministered in Rome. Paul, who himself carried the same prejudices as John and the others in their early days, brought religious prejudice to an extreme, hunting down Christians, and having them imprisoned or killed. Upon his dramatic conversion to the faith, he was struck blind, but his eyes were opened in other ways, seeing how God shows favouritism to no race, creed, status, gender or colour. *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,”* he wrote, words often tragically ignored in the history of the Christian faith, but which reflect the character of Jesus, which reflect the heart of God, to perfection.

And so John, in his later years himself based in Ephesus, ministering to Jews and non-Jews alike, has fully taken on the example of Jesus, rejecting prejudice and racism in all its forms, as have all the Apostles. How could it be otherwise, when it was God who created us all? How could it be otherwise, when Jesus utterly rejected hatred, and called his people to forgiveness, mercy and love.

And so we come to our powerful reading today. John sets it up for us in the strongest possible terms. *“I write this to you so that you will not sin,”* he says, establishing the firm parameters of right and wrong. And then he writes,

*We know that we have come to know Jesus if we keep his commands. Whoever says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.*

Strong language. The strongest possible words. What we are about to hear is of the greatest importance, and is the heart of John's message and Jesus' life and teaching. What is this command we must obey, lest we be called liars? Again, John sets it up:

*Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard.*

What is that old command? Of course, John is quoting Jesus, in words found in the Gospel of John; when Jesus first said them, they were not old, but new: *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

Yet somehow, people began to forget this central commandment of Jesus. And so, incredibly, John must make it more clear. And so, *"Yet I am writing you a new command,"* he says. What could it be? Listen:

*Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.*

It is, as John says, both an old and a new commandment. It is the commandment of Jesus – "Love one another" – and the flip side of that coin – "Do not hate."

That doesn't mean, "Love only the people who are like you, who look like you, think like you, are from the same ethnic and cultural background as you." It means, Love and do not hate. Everyone. Remember, when Jesus said, "Love your neighbour

as yourself,” and was asked, “Who is my neighbour,” he answered with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The Parable of the hated, despised, oppressed, rejected, Samaritan. “Love that guy,” said Jesus. He’s your neighbour too.

My friends, racism and prejudice is an offence against love, is a rejection of the example of Jesus, and is a denial of the love of God for all the people of the world. We, as Christians, must reject all forms of racism and prejudice in the strongest possible terms. We must do so by proclamation, by example, and we must do so by the way in which we love, actively love, and do not hate, even passively hate, our neighbour. As the Presbyterian Church in Canada, at its most recent General Assembly, prophetically declared: *“The Presbyterian Church in Canada affirms that all doctrines, policies and practices based on or advocating for superiority of peoples or individuals on the basis of national origin or racial, religious, ethnic or cultural differences are racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable and socially unjust.”* Strong words; but such days as our need strong words, and strong deeds.

The roots of prejudice go deep. But God’s love goes deeper still. Examine your heart for the darkness of racism and prejudice, and allow the light of God to shine within you, giving you a new heart, a new outlook, and a fresh determination to live as Jesus did – in love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness, seeing all people as one, as children of one father – of His Father – the God and Father of us all. May we not rest until God’s Kingdom comes, and God’s will is done, on earth as it is in heaven.

*Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.*

Shine your light upon us and upon all people, we pray O Lord. Amen.