

Service for Zion, August 9, 2020 – The Letters of John part 5

Hymns: 267 - Rejoice the Lord is King; 266 – “King of Kings and Lord of Lords”;
363- All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name

Scripture: 1 John 5:1-5

Sermon Title: An Exclusive Belief

1 John 5:1-5

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world: our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

“Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” These are dangerous words. They were dangerous when John wrote them, and they are dangerous now. To understand why they are dangerous – after all, they sound pretty innocuous – we need to take a trip back to the time and place where John first wrote them, and why they were seen as threatening the foundational principles of the Roman Empire itself.

The John who wrote these letters we’ve been reading had a powerful and effective ministry in the country we now call Turkey, in the area known as Asia Minor, just across the Aegean Sea from Greece. He had responsibility for a number of communities of faith; Ephesus, where today you can find his very tomb, as well as a half-dozen or so cities which were related to one another through trade and government. All part of the Roman Empire.

The trouble for John was that Christianity was against the law. It hadn’t been at first; as far as the Romans were concerned, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth were just another odd sect of the Jews, to whom the Romans had become accustomed over the years. Judaism was a “tolerated” religion, and despite being kept under watchful control, Jews were more or less allowed to be Jewish, with Jewish belief in their One Invisible God, odd though that seemed to the polytheistic, or “belief in many gods” Romans.

The trouble was, it was becoming apparent that Christianity wasn’t just a small sect of Judaism; that while most Christians at this time were Jews, there were plenty of others getting in on the act, and Judaism was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with Christians and their claim of Jesus as the Messiah, and so began to make it clear that

Christians were not, in fact, Jews, and were therefore not entitled to the protected status from Rome which the Jewish faith enjoyed. Christianity, it seemed, was out on its own.

Now why was this a problem? After all, there were many dozens of religions within the Roman Empire at the time, some of which were given “official” or “legal” status, and dozens more which existed under the category of “tolerated.” But Christianity was neither “legal” nor “tolerated,” and wouldn’t be for another couple hundred years. The problem was, like Judaism, Christianity taught there was one God and only one God, and only this God should be worshipped. Why was this a problem? Because in order to keep the peace in an empire which embraced many cultures, Roman law forbade a religion to make an exclusive claim that it and only it was right. And secondly, to keep the loyalty of this widespread empire centred on Rome, citizens were expected to worship not only their own local gods but also the traditional Roman gods, including even departed and current Emperors *as* gods – make sacrifices to them, bow down to their statues, pray to them when required.

Christians were notable for refusing to do this. And notable too, for proclaiming Jesus as “King of Kings” and “Lord of Lords,” relegating all other gods – as well as the Roman Emperor – to subordinate status. This was different than Judaism; the Romans could tolerate the Jewish idea of an invisible God, but not the Christian understanding that this invisible God was embodied within a man named Jesus, who claimed to be King and Lord, over and above Caesar. Pilate put him to death for it, but the Christians claimed Jesus had been resurrected, and was the true King and Lord, Emperor of all. This, the Romans refused to tolerate, and so Christianity was declared illegal, and its leaders – and followers – subject to criminal prosecution. Such as imprisonment or torture. Or death. Even possessing Christian documents – Gospels, writings of the Apostles – could get one thrown to the lions.

So with all of that in mind, perhaps you might understand why the words, “*Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God,*” would be considered dangerous. Particularly that word “*overcomes.*” “*Is victorious over;*” is another way to read it. “*Conquers,*” is yet another. And that would get the Romans excited. “The Son of God” part, is another. Because who, for the Romans, is the Son of God? Caesar. What John is doing in this letter is giving a call to complete and total allegiance to Jesus, allegiance over even Rome itself, and that through this allegiance, we would be proven victorious over all the world. Which, as any Roman could tell you, is treason.

Because Roman culture demanded toleration and acceptance of all gods, all religions. To claim that there was one right way, one true God, was to go against the

Roman doctrine of all gods having an equal claim upon the truth. Participating in the religious ritual of the civic gods – Zeus, Athena, and others – was to bring harmony and prosperity to the city. To sacrifice to the Emperor was simply an act of civic and national loyalty. To refuse to go along with this was to fly in the face of what was acceptable. To be a Christian was to be labelled as Not Fitting In. As “Who do you think you are.” As “What makes you think you’re right.” To be a Christian, to stand out as holding different beliefs, different values, was to be regarded with suspicion, was to be seen as The Other.

Okay, so what. Last I checked, none of us live in Ancient Rome, nor are we burdened with Roman values and trigger-words. But the words, “*Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God,*” are no longer safe in our society of 21st Century Canada, either. We may not be facing imprisonment, torture or death, but we’re increasingly facing criticism, censure and scorn. Why?

Back to our Hebrew forebears of the faith, the family from which we Christians have sprung. And the defining characteristic of the people of the Family of God, Hebrew or Christian, is this: “*I, the Lord your God, am one. You shall have no other gods before Me.*” It is the first of the Ten Commandments, the central statement of the Hebrew faith. “*The Lord our God, the Lord is One.*”

Or, as we Christians put it, “We believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth.” Not just “a god,” but God. God who made the heavens and earth. God who delivered his people from bondage in Egypt. The God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Rachel. The God of Joseph and Mary. The God whom Jesus, and we, call Father.

In this regard, both Judaism and Christianity are not inclusive but exclusive. Everyone is welcome, but every god is not. At the very foundation of our faith, there is no room for syncretism – for combining religious beliefs. We are identified by our belief in the One True God. “No other gods, only me,” says Commandment One, and inherent in that is a statement of fidelity, a covenant which is the basis of our relationship with God.

Think of another covenant which defines us and our relationships – think of marriage. The whole point of the marriage ceremony, the promises and vows and commitments and rings, are all to say one thing: “I commit myself to you alone.” Take away the flowers and the limo and the fancy outfits, and the marriage boils down to this: “No other woman but you,” says the Groom. “No other man but you,” responds his Bride. The couple is now made one; this commitment defines them. Break that

foundational commitment, and the entire covenant is imperiled, because the foundational identity of the partnership is shattered. Fidelity is not only a command; it is the very basis of marriage.

Our foundational identity as Christians is as the children of God, delivered from sin and given new life, new identity, in Jesus Christ. We are incorporated into the very family of God, through turning to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. Even as God delivered the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, leading them through the waters of the Red Sea and into freedom and new life, so we have been delivered through faith in Christ from our slavery to sin, brought through the waters of Baptism into the covenant community of the Church, in which and through which we live and serve as a new people, whose god is the Lord God, and God alone. Our very identity is wrapped up in who God is, and who we are in relation to God, and in relationship with God, through his Son, Jesus Christ, whom we confess to be the Son of God, the Way, the Truth, the Life. Not “a Son of God;” not “a” way; not “a” truth; not “a” life; the Son of God, the Way, the Truth, the Life.

Canadian culture, however, increasingly demands toleration and acceptance of all gods, all religions. To claim that there is one right way, one true God, is to go against the increasingly prevalent concept that all faiths have an equal claim upon the truth. To refuse to go along with this is to fly in the face of what is acceptable. To be a Christian, to stand out for holding different beliefs, different values, is to be regarded with suspicion, is to be seen as The Other. I’m increasingly asked, when sharing my Christian faith, “What makes you think you’re right?” My response is, “It isn’t about whether or not I think I’m right. It’s about whether I think Jesus was right. And I do.”

It is increasingly important for those who follow Jesus as Saviour and Lord to Stand Up For the Faith, Stand Firm In the Faith, Stand Out Through your Faith.

Stand up for the Faith. All religions are not the same. All religions are not equally true. All religions do not lead to God. Jesus is not on a par with Muhammad, with Buddha, with Confucius. Jesus is the unique and only Son of God. The life and words and teaching and example of Christ are like no other the world has known, and are the only path to freedom, healing, wholeness, and true peace among the nations. We are called to treat all people, including people of other faiths, with courtesy, kindness and love, but also point them to new life in Jesus Christ.

Because the sacrifice of Christ, the death and resurrection of Christ, are unique and transformative events, grounded in geographic place and historical time. They are not mere stories, they are not a fable or a vision or a dream. They happened, and because they happened, because Christ was sacrificed for the sins of the world and by

the power of God raised from death, we can have true forgiveness, true salvation, we can be the very brothers and sisters of Jesus, the very children of God. This is our faith, this is the faith grounded in Jesus, proclaimed by the Apostles, handed down through the history of the church, and it is the faith for which we need to stand up once again, despite the relativistic demands of our world. In writing, *“Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God,”* John is telling us to Stand Up For the Faith.

Secondly, Stand Firm In the Faith. It is tempting to regard our faith as convenient when necessary, but ultimately transferable, malleable, disposable. I’ll never forget the man I met who said, “I used to go to church, until it became inconvenient.” We treat church like we’re doing God a favour for showing up. We treat it like a commodity, a product, and we’re picky consumers, looking for “what’s in it for me.” Stand up for the faith? Forget that. Sit down, and the pew better be comfy, or I might not be back next week. After all, hardly anyone goes to church anymore.

Want to sleep in on Sundays? It’s easy. Just follow the crowd. But Jesus never said, “Follow the crowd.” Jesus said, “Follow me.” When John writes, *“Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God,”* he’s saying, Don’t give up. Don’t give in. Overcome! Stand Firm In the Faith.

Finally, Stand Out Through your Faith. Live a life that is different, in order to make a difference. We are not called to be followers. We are called to be leaders. We are called to be lights, shining in the darkness of our world. We are called to live in such a way that people will see in us a reflection of the brilliance of the light of God, a light of truth, and justice, and holiness, and love. A light which rises above the exploitation of people and resources in our materialistic culture, and recognises the sacred within one another and within our world. Blend in? Compromise? Follow? No - When John writes, *“Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God,”* he is telling us to be an inspiration to all, and a sign of the Kingdom of God.

Now, related to this important point, I began this sermon by saying, *“These are dangerous words.”* And they are dangerous for a final reason, a reason which has damaged the church not from the outside, but from the inside, for centuries. *“Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.”* That is true – that is absolutely, deeply true. In fact, John says this twice in our very reading, opening and closing the paragraph with these words. But far too often, we have ignored the middle of that paragraph. Here’s the whole thing again:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the

children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world: our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

Believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God is not some intellectual head game. It is a way of life. And that way of life is the way of love. That's what these little letters of John are all about. To believe that Jesus is the Christ is to be, says John, "born of God." And to be born of God is to love both God and the children of God. We do that, live that, demonstrate that, by following God's commands. And what are those commands? As we have said again and again over the past weeks of this series, the commands of God are, "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself." Or as Jesus said even more simply, "Love one another as I have loved you." This is what belief in Jesus as the Son of God entails. Not just intellectual assent; but active participation as a follower of Jesus. It means to love.

When the church has focussed only on belief, and has ignored practice, it has done both itself and God great discredit. Throughout these letters, John is telling us in no uncertain terms to be certain to combine the two – belief and practice – head and hands – and so overcome the world.

These are dangerous words. Dangerous not only because they're out of step with society; dangerous not only because they involve us making a decision, and taking a stand; but dangerous because when we take these words to heart, when we live them, we will find ourselves changed. When we combine belief and practice, faith and love, we will no longer be who we once were. We will be conquerors, overcomers, victorious in the face of all the world would throw our way, for we will be the very Children of God, the Brothers and Sisters of Jesus Christ.

Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.