

Sermon for Zion, August 23, 2020

Hymns: 425 – We Praise You, O God; 774 – God Forgave My Sin;  
751 – Forgive Our Sins As We Forgive

Scripture: 3 John

Sermon Title: Imitating the Good

*3 John*

*The elder,*

*To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.*

*Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*

*Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.*

*I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.*

*Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God. Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.*

*I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.*

*Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.*

I'm going to be honest with you – I have no idea what this little letter is doing in the New Testament. More than any other New Testament document, this letter of John – 3 John, we call it – is a piece of personal correspondence, written

by someone we do know, but to someone we do not, mentioning people we also don't know, and dealing with an issue we know nothing about.

There must have been numerous such pieces of personal correspondence floating around, so I wonder why this one was chosen as fitting into the New Testament. To do so, it must have been cherished, copied, passed around from hand to hand and church to church, and considered as sufficiently instructive, sufficiently valuable, to finally be regarded as Scripture. That's how the New Testament ultimately was formed – it is the collection of documents which the Christians of the first century felt best reflected the person, life and teachings of Jesus and the apostles who followed him. It being dangerous to possess Christian writings, as Christianity was at various points against the law and actively suppressed, only those documents regarded as deeply valuable – Gospels, letters – we're regarded as worthy of risking life and limb.

Such valued documents were copied and sent from church to church, country to country, and read and studied and preached. Documents recognised as forgeries were not valued, not extensively copied, and so fell into disuse and obscurity. Although each New Testament book and letter originally existed independently, eventually collections were made – the four Gospels, the writings of Paul – and were bound together as one, an expensive proposition in that day, being more time consuming to copy, and technologically more difficult to produce.

Eventually, lists were made of those writings regarded as most useful, most valuable, most authoritative of Apostolic teaching and witness. These lists, copies of which we have today, contain most of the New Testament we have in our Bibles. Some include an extra book or two which were not universally regarded as useful – one such work, the Shepherd of Hermas, was cherished by some but not by others – look it up on the Internet, read it yourself, and I think you'll decide it doesn't really belong after all – but on the whole, the New Testament as we know it was the collection of writings most used by the Church – the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the letters of Paul, the Book of Hebrews (there were some arguments there, as there was uncertainty about authorship), James, the letters of Peter (again, some disagreement regarding 2 Peter, which sounds so different from 1<sup>st</sup>), these letters of John we've been reading, the odd little letter of Jude, which is kind of angry and strange, and then the Revelation itself, which the Eastern church never had much time for, and which Martin Luther

thought the church should have gotten rid of years ago, as no one has ever really figured it out, nor was likely to.

In short – after that long explanation, here I am saying, “in short” – the New Testament was not formed by some bureaucratic committee up in an ivory tower somewhere, but by a more organic process, led by the people actually reading and studying and preaching these books – by the people who valued them as a guide and rule of life, and as the best reflection of the person, words and deeds of Jesus, and the teaching of those closest to him.

And somehow, this little letter of 3 John is part of that process – but probably only because it had been bundled together with 2 John, a more general and useful letter. I have to confess that over the years, I have paid it very little attention. Because like I said, it’s a piece of personal correspondence, which, I assumed, has little to do with me. Or you. But because I’m committed to doing this series, I feel an obligation to read it more carefully, and to see what it has to say to us today. And I think I found a way in.

Here’s what’s happening. As we learned in previous weeks, John is responsible for the oversight, care, and spiritual nurture of numerous congregations under his care. We know of seven large ones in cities in and around his home base of Ephesus, in Turkey; and within those cities, there would have been numerous smaller congregations, all meeting in homes and rented buildings – there were no purpose-built churches back then, as Christianity, as we mentioned, was not a legal religion.

One of those congregations was led by a fellow named Diotrephes. I’m afraid I can’t tell you anything about him, other than what John tells us. And what John tells us isn’t good. Diotrephes seems to have taken control of this particular congregation, and has been moving it away from the truth. He, as John says, “wants to be first,” and so is bad-mouthing John to the people, spreading malicious gossip. He has cut his community of faith off from fellowship with others, and is setting up on his own, which concerns John, as in doing so, he is cutting his people off from their connection with the true faith, and the sound and established teaching of the Apostles. In his earlier letters, John is warning of such leaders, and of how they are leading their people astray. We heard about them last week. And Diotrephes is a case in point.

So what's John to do? He wants to go to the trouble spot and personally address the situation, but in his earlier letters we learn that he is prevented from travelling – age, perhaps; infirmity, maybe; there is also evidence that he is under a form of house arrest, prohibited from leaving Ephesus, and so must content himself, as he says, with pen and ink, although he would much prefer to be face to face.

So John is sending others in his stead, to visit Diotrephes, and effect a reconciliation. But Diotrephes is showing them the door, and barring them from having any communication with the believers there. Our letter is written to a fellow, Gaius, whom John is thanking for showing these emissaries hospitality and providing them with resources for their long journey and their stay. Gaius, John tells us, is still faithful to the truth, and is working together with others to maintain that truth, and bring it to light.

The letter we have in our hands was delivered from the hand of John to the home of Gaius by one Demetrius, yet another emissary sent by John to appeal to Diotrephes. We're not told if he met with any greater success.

The only theological advice in the letter – which is, incidentally, the only New Testament document that doesn't mention Jesus by name, only referring to Jesus as "The Name" – is as follows: *"Do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God."*

Now, I could preach a sermon on that. I have, in fact, done so, more or less every week over the past 6 weeks of sermons in this series. John is nothing if not consistent in his letters, and this verse which I've just quoted is a pretty good summary of where we've come so far. And so I'm not going to preach about that again. I'm going to preach about what's happening in the letter.

Diotrephes, as leader of that congregation, was almost certainly originally appointed by John. He would have been well known to John, and was doubtless considered a co-worker for the truth, a companion in the struggle, a friend. But now, for reasons of his own, he's stabbing John in the back. Spreading malicious gossip. Cutting John loose. Closing the door.

And this is where we come in. Because I'll bet this has happened to you. I'll bet, in some way or other, someone you trusted, or worked with, or considered a friend – maybe even a brother or sister – turned on you. Or turned away from you. Maybe even bad-mouthed you to others. Stabbed you in the back. And that hurts. There is little in life that hurts more.

Now, our natural response is to hit back. To “do unto others as they have done unto you.” To make them feel the same hurt and rejection you have felt. To hope that their pain will somehow lessen our own. But of course, it won't. It will just send our own pain deeper, where it will fester and grow. And that's no answer.

Because Jesus never said, “Do unto others as they have done unto you.” What Jesus said was, “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*” Or, in more contemporary language, “*Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you.*” And nobody wants to be hurt. Rejected. Bad-mouthed. Betrayed. Nobody wants to be treated that way.

Jesus also said (Matthew 6:14-15), “*If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*” And he said this because he knew that if we insist on harbouring grudges, resentments, and revenge, clinging to wrongs and betrayals that others have visited upon us, we will indeed not be able to realise the full blessing of forgiveness. Because to forgive is to find forgiveness. To extend forgiveness to others is to open our hearts to receive the forgiveness of God. To refuse to forgive others is to close our hearts to the forgiveness God offers us. And so, even if others fail to respond, it is up to us to initiate reconciliation. To make the attempt. To try. “*Seven times?*” asks Peter, incredulous. “*Seventy times seven,*” answered Jesus (Matthew 18:21-22). In other words, “*Keep trying.*”

That's what John was doing in this letter. Diotrephes had done him wrong, but instead of throwing Diotrephes to the wolves, John is making repeated attempts, through sending letters and emissaries, to stop the bleeding, mend the wound, heal the breach. He is refusing to stoop to Diotrephes' level; John is instead determined to follow the example of Jesus. And you might remember that

it was Jesus who, even when on the cross, prayed forgiveness for those who put him there.

That's why John includes, in this otherwise odd little letter, this timeless line: *“Do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.”* And John has, in the person of Jesus, seen the face of God. The face of grace, of mercy, of forgiveness, of love. And he has decided to imitate not the example of Diotrephes, but the example of Jesus. And he is trying – again and again – to help Diotrephes do the same. Not because it is easy. But because it is right. And because it is what Jesus would do. And did. And tells us to do too.

I guess those early Christians knew what they were doing when they cherished and copied and passed on this little letter. I'm always glad these things are not up to me, but are up to the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit, moving through His people.

What is up to me is to take seriously the lesson of this letter. To take this example to heart. To set aside the grudges and hurts and resentments I carry with me like so much useless, encumbering baggage, and to let them go; to allow God's forgiveness of me to flow through me to others; to pick up the phone, to write that letter, to knock on that door, to begin the slow and difficult but all-so-necessary process of reconciliation, of making peace between myself and those with whom I have fallen out, regardless of who started it, or who was in the wrong; to not lower myself to the hurtful actions of others, but to imitate the good; to imitate Jesus.

That's what this little letter is about. And that's what I should be about too. What we all should be about, we who seek to walk in truth and love; we who follow Jesus. And today would be a good time to start.

For John; for Gaius; for Diotrephes; for Demetrius; for Jesus: Thanks be to God. Amen.