

John 17:6-19
1 John 5:9-13

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
7th Sun. in Easter, Mem. Day, May 24, 2009

No Room for the Undecided

Usually I try not to give too much background about the Scripture readings and try to keep the study out of the sermon. Since most of us are not quite so familiar with some of the lesser known books of the Bible, I thought a little background may help us understand. Most experts agree that 1, 2, and 3 John are written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of John because the form and words are almost identical. Tradition indicates John is one of Jesus' disciples with his brother James, who are the sons of Zebedee. He is also the nephew of Jesus. His mother, Salome, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, are sisters. He is also the one Jesus refers to as the Beloved, the one whom Jesus loves, and the one to whom Jesus entrusts the care of His mother when He dies. It is believed these three letters were intended for the church in Ephesus but were sent and read as part of a group of testimonial documents circulated among various churches.

That being said, sometimes we wonder and ask how we come to accept the testimony of witnesses? Do we look at the set of the jaw, or the look around the eyes, or the steadiness of the voice, or the person's credentials?

The tradition of John does not leave room for indecision or uncertainty. Both John's Gospel and his letters disapprove of those who are unable to decide about Jesus. For those who question whether to believe Christ is the Son of God is, to John, the equivalent of openly rejecting Jesus Christ. John has known Jesus for a long time. He played with Jesus when they were boys. John is passionate in his devotion to Christ.

According to John, an important part of deciding whether Jesus is the Son of God is the nature of the witness or testimony offered. Almost every Christian comes to faith because of someone else's testimony, especially those disciples who participated in Jesus' teaching and ministry. Those of us who grow up in Christian families may not recognize the witness we receive because it is generally in the form of example and nurture, and it occurs in our early stages of growing so that we take it for granted and do not label it as witness. Reading a story from a book of children's Bible stories, learning how to pray the Lord's Prayer, learning to say our "God blesses" at bedtime, singing "Jesus Loves Me" and other songs in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School and then singing it at home afterwards are all examples of witnessing. Another example is the use of the Greek word for witness which suggests that the death of early Christians for what they believe serves as a witness by turning defeat or death into growth.

Witnessing as John understands it is in the form of words – words of Jesus and words about Jesus. The Gospel of John opens with the testimony of John the Baptist about Jesus and closes by characterizing the Gospel itself as the testimony of the Beloved disciple to the things Jesus said and did.

In the verses right before our passage, especially in the King James' Version, John refers to three kinds of witnesses in reference to Jesus Christ: the water, the blood, and the Spirit. From the context of this book and the New Testament, we believe that John means first the water of baptism, therefore faith; the blood refers to the Cross; the Spirit refers to God's own validation of His Son, and His assurance in our lives of Jesus Christ.

Verse 9 of 1 John 5 may be paraphrased to say: We accept the witness of human beings, so we ought to accept all the more this witness we have received from God. Just as God is greater than our hearts and greater than the One who is in the world, so God's testimony is greater. The language seems to contrast God's greatness with the smallness of human beings. God's testimony is obviously better.

We ask, how can we come to accept any witness? Always the deciding factor is trust. The word trust does not appear in the NRSV translation of the Bible but it should. The Greek word indicates trust or confidence as well as belief. These details are inseparable. Those who believe in the Son of God believe because they trust in the God who sent Jesus Christ. Those who do not believe, have no faith and no trust in God.

For John, the division is even more radical than trusting or not trusting. In verse 10, John explains, those who do not trust God "have made Him a liar." This language is strong. There is no room for second thoughts. There is no category for "undecided" votes. Anyone who does not believe God, is calling God a liar. The result of the trust, or lack of trust, is further discussed in vs. 12 where John says, "whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life."

Some Christians may describe this language as offensive. But John seems to sense his own harshness and follows this with an assurance that those who believe, already have eternal life as a gift of God.

John finishes this section with the strong claim of the importance of Jesus Christ in the life of Christians. The eternal life we have from God comes through our faith in His Son. There is no eternal life apart from the Son of God. Jesus Christ is not one of several saviors, nor is He a shepherd among a group of shepherds. Jesus Christ is the Savior, the true Shepherd. God speaks in His Son, and we are to listen to what He says. Karl Barth says, “When we pronounce the name of Jesus Christ, we are not speaking of an idea . . . the name of Jesus is this actual name and title; this person is involved . . . God really encompasses us in Jesus Christ on every side.” We cannot escape. But there is also no drop into nothingness. In pronouncing the name of Jesus Christ, we are on the way. Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Jesus Christ is the center of our being, the center of our very existence.

John tells us eternal life is in Jesus Christ. This is the Good News. It is not a burden but an adventure.

The Rev. Earl Palmer says he has seen it proven to himself the daily truthfulness of these unforgettable sentences of John. He says our lives work better when we live from the true center, Jesus Christ. It is also true that the more we grow in loving people around us, the more we experience love. Love is so durable and powerful that its resources or resourcefulness never wears out. The more we grow as a Christian and give witness to being a Christian, the better we will feel about ourselves in the sense of knowing and watching the daily assuring of God’s grace at work in our own lives each day. It is true God’s love is new and better each morning.

God reminds us, “In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins”. The Resurrection is God’s vindication that the Crucified Jesus, this One and no other, is the Son of God! This truth is so fundamental, so easily forgotten, that it literally surrounds many worshipers every Sunday morning.

God wants us to be His witnesses. He encourages us to model our lives on Jesus’ examples so we may be with Him in eternity. Every day is to be a new adventure in our faith journeys. God wants to help us in our faith journeys. All He asks of us is our love, trust, belief in Him, and our obedience. May God be with us as we follow Jesus Christ, the way, and the truth, and the life. Amen.