

## Sermon 4-7-24

### Paul Purdue preaching

Last Tuesday, after what we church workers call Easter Monday, I looked at my sermon text and I wondered why I laid out a preaching series rooted in First John.

Unlike most of the Bible, First John does not tell a story, at least not in a traditional sense with a storyline, plot, and characters. If I had selected today's Gospel lesson from John there is a nice straightforward story: Jesus appears to the Disciples, showing his hands and feet, but somehow Thomas' missed this so Jesus shows up later for Thomas. The Gospel story flows nicely and ends with a blessing "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Besides its lack of clear story lines, First John piles up one theological idea on top of the next in a way few Biblical books do. For example, In just five of our verses today, First John stacks up at over eight unique theological arguments...

- 1) *The message is "God is light"*
- 2) *We lie if we claim to live in God but our lives lack light*
- 3a) *living in light creates community with Christ and one another*
- 3b) *Christ cleanses us from every sin*
- 4a) *If we claim, "We don't have sin," we lie to ourselves*
- 4b) *if we confess our sins, God forgive us our sins and cleanses us from everything bad*
- 5a) *If we claim, "We have never sinned," we make God out like a liar*
- 5b) *and such gnostic denials of our sinfulness shows God's Word has not taken hold in us*

Unpacking those 5 verses will take the next two hours or a six week sermon series!

Besides its lack of a clear story line and a tendency to pile on theological propositions, First John uses too many pronouns. The writer pours on over 60 pronouns in the opening 16 verses. These 60 pronouns make it hard to know who exactly is the "we", "they", or "him" the writer is referring to. The opening line declares "*We announce to you what existed from the beginning*" without telling us who the "we" or the "you" or even the "what" is. We have to figure it out, guess or read a commentary. The Book of Romans can be theologically dense like 1 John, but it begins with a real introduction "From Paul" and then uses 17 verses to build connections and context with "*those in Rome who are dearly loved by God.*" First John does not identify a clear author or audience. It is pretty arty, ethereal and mysterious. Such open-ended prose can lead to some pretty bad proof-texting when people isolate and apply verses with a wooden literalism. For example 1:8 warns us not to say that we don't sin, but verse 3:10 tells us those born of God can't sin. Literalism always ends up painting us into a corner! We need an artful eye.

First John embraces mystery, poetic prose, and something akin to coded language. Whereas the Apostle Paul is pretty straight forward "*we preach Christ crucified which is a scandal to some and foolish to others*" ( 1 Cor. 1) First John floats

around the ether with lines like *“what we have heard, seen with our eyes, handled with our hands, about the Word of Life, The Life revealed, the Eternal Life we testify about... so you can have fellowship with us!”* In a few verses the writer uses 3 unique names for God, but does not clearly identify Christ until later! First John never tells us what they specifically saw, heard, or handled.

And yet at times First John can be very direct using the word liar more than any other book in the Bible- using “liar” 5 of the 12 times it appears in the New Testament: “The one who claims, “I know him (Jesus),” while not keeping his (Jesus’) commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in this person.” That is direct!

So why wade into this little book that stacks up theology, uses too many pronouns, deals in mystery and then tosses in ziggers? Well surely our creator values diverse expressions, people love both classical and country, but beyond diversity First John is about Love. I would invite you to read First John this coming week. There are only 5 chapters, and at 105 verses it is shorter than a few Psalms! Why not read one chapter each day and maybe you will come to love First John like I do.

I have always loved First John first maybe because it talks about love- it holds so many lines that could be turned into love Songs. Consider that only the poetry of Psalms and Song of Solomon, and the Gospel of John use the word “Love” more than First John. About one fourth of the 105 verses in First John include the word “Love”. First John’s hits include “God is Love”, “walking in the light”, “Love don’t hate”, “love overcomes”, “Love perfects us”, “You’re a lover or a liar”, “Love crushes fear” and more. John’s ethereal blend of poetry and theology may leave tidy theologians scratching their heads, but John’s word pictures invite us to ponder the power of God’s Love in our everyday lives. So let’s break down a bit of First John this morning.

Back in the eighties Whitney Houston sang”

Ooh, how will I know if he really loves me?  
Ooh, how will I know? (don't trust your feelings)  
How will I know?  
How will I know? (love can be deceiving)  
How will I know?

First John can’t answer if that person really loves you, but tells about God’s Love. How do we know if we are connected to God’s Higher Love... First John croons:  
*This is how we know that we know Jesus: we keep Jesus’ commandments?  
If we say, “I know Jesus” but don’t keep Jesus’ commandments, we are liars,(harsh)  
But the love of God is truly perfected in whoever keeps Christ’s word.  
This is how we know we are in Christ; we live in the same way as Jesus lived*

Inside First John’s overstuffed theology sandwich is a beautiful promise: Christ in us reveals God’s love in our living. Christianity is more than believing things, Christianity is doing the things that Christ did, but our believing and doing is all upheld and undergirded with God’s Love. So First John talks about being forgiven and cleansed of

all the vestiges of sin, and our being perfected in love. When we partner with God's love, by doing the things that Christ did, then Love becomes the pattern of our living. God's Love empowers us to be loving. And our acts of love activate and reinforce God's love- and God's boundless forgiveness refreshes us over and over picking us up when we blow it.

All of us can practice love and most of us at some point could shoot a basketball through a hoop. Not all of us, but most of us have enough hand eye coordination and strength to shoot a basket. Cailen Clark has perfected her shot, leading her to be the all time leading scorer in college basketball history, dazzling to watch. She has taken her god-given gifts and perfected them in the gym, she shoots 100 three's and 22 other shots every day while running. She lifts weights and does squats at a fast aerobic pace so as to build fast twitch muscle endurance, she does dribbling drills for hours. Now God does not care who wins tonight's national championship nor will God judge Catien by her jumper, but God does care how we love one another. What do we do with the Love of God given to all of us, do we practice and work on perfecting Love? Do we workout so as to live more like Jesus? Do we renew our souls each day with Sermon on the Mount drills and weekly Christian community and worship each week? Do we put in the practice to become Christ-like? Do we build on God's love already within us?

The Love of God activates our love: as we practice the presence of Love, the Love of God transforms us. It is a mysterious loop. The love of God has an effect and Love is perfected by the way we live. Love has its effect. As we give we become generous, as we love we become loving, as we forgive our way becomes forgiveness, as we pray we become prayerful, as we stop judging we lose our judgemental attitudes, as we do justice we become just, and we act like Christ we become Christlike. (Matt 5-7, Luke 6) But Love and grace feeds all this.

I hope you will read a little First John this week, let its run-on theology soak into your soul. And think about this: what am I doing with God's love, am I trying to perfect it in my living? Am I loving God with all my heart, mind and soul (doing the daily sabbath drills) and then perfecting love by striving to love others and myself in everyday life? Let us be open to God's love and mercy so that we can perfect love in the way we live with and treat others. amen