

Sunday November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Communion

1 John 3:1-3

“Being Recognized”

Today’s epistle lesson was actually the lectionary lesson for last week for All Saints Day. I thought, however, that given we were holding an in-person service today, and serving communion that the text might better suited for this week. After all, the theme is Christian unity and Communion among many things is a symbol of our unity in Christ. To begin today, I have chosen to share a story that perhaps you have heard before, but it still is a good one.

Here is a funny bit that was originally done by comedian Emo Phillips. Two men are standing on a bridge, one is about to jump off, and the other is trying to talk him out of it. The man asks the jumper, "So are you a Christian, or a Hindu, or a Jew, or what?" The jumper replies, "A Christian." The man says, "Small world, me too! Protestant, or Catholic, or Orthodox?" The jumper answers, "Protestant."

The man replies, "Me too! What denomination?" The jumper says, "Baptist". The man replies, "Me too! Southern Baptist or Northern Baptist?" The jumper answers, "Northern Baptist." The man replies, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" The jumper answers, "Northern Conservative Baptist." The man replies, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern region?"

The jumper answers, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." The man replies, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region council of 1912?" The jumper answers, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region council of 1912." The man then pushes the jumper off the bridge and screams, "Die Heretic!"

We may chuckle at this little story, but the reality is that Christians, and particularly Baptists, have struggled to encourage and strengthen unity. Our most recent CBOQ virtual assembly just proves my point. Over our history as Baptist in Ontario and Quebec, we have drawn lines in the sand on many issues. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, modernism was the buzz word. Our association of Baptists split, primarily led by T.T. Shields.

This crisis was prompted by a professor At McMaster Divinity College named Dr. Matthews who claimed in a lecture that the Adam and Eve story was not to be taken literally. It was all the excuse some needed to pull away from the CBOQ. Later on, the new group called Regular Baptists had their own split, spawning the Fellowship Baptists. Now you have a sense of why there are so many Baptist churches in Simcoe.

Since then, we have had schisms over whether or not to join the United Church, should we adopt the curriculum jointly produced with the United Church, women in ministry and most recently, how we relate to and minister to the LGBTQ community. In every controversy, people on both sides of the arguments, took a stand as if to say, “Its my way or the highway!” John’s words in his first letter, were intended to be words of encouragement written to a community that is troubled by schism.

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Whatever were the details of the split -- and since we have a response by only one side, we have to read between the lines and in mirror-image to figure it out -- the disagreement had been serious enough that some folks had packed up and left the church. Anyone who has experienced the trauma of a congregational (or denominational) split, can imagine how devastating this development would have been for parties on both sides of the divide.

This little community believed by many to be Ephesus, was unable to remain in unified fellowship, due to significant differences in their beliefs about Jesus. At the heart of the matter, according to the author, is that the people who have left, are denying that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22) and denying that he is the incarnate Son of God (1 John 4:2-3). They still understand themselves to be followers of Jesus, but what they believe and confess about him significantly differs from those who remain.

One, of the primary aims of 1 John, is to persuade the remaining community members that they have good reason to hold on to their confession, because they have experienced its truth in their very existence as a community. The author emphasizes this view in the introductory verse: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ...” (1 John 1:1).

Faith, according to this letter, is not simply a matter of cognitive assertion; it is the testimony of the real-life, embodied experience that has been given to them by God. The glue that holds the church together is God’s love, which has bound them into one family as children of God. Those who have chosen to depart, claim fellowship with Jesus, and they also claim that they have no sin (1 John 1:8) -- claims that the author refutes.

The specific details of their sin, are not spelled out; that is, there is not an enumerated list of behaviors or actions, except that they chose to leave the group: “they went out from us” (2:18-19). From the perspective of 1 John, their departure violates the identity of the community as those who “love one another.” Although they claim to have the light of Christ, their actions do not show it; they “hate brother or sister” (2:9). In other words, the opponents talk the talk, but do not walk the walk.

In contrast, 1 John urges the community to remain (“abide”) in Christ by walking “just as he walked” (2:6). At issue then, is the importance of living in community, in such a way that it reflects their walk with Jesus. “See!” Perhaps better translated “*Look at!*”; the first word of the passage, suggests that the love given by God is something that people can actually see. It is not a fuzzy, feel-good sensation, but a concrete and visible reality that has already been bestowed on the community that follows Christ.

Readers of the Gospel of John would readily hear the echoes from its prologue: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God (John 1:12; see also 1 John 3:2, 10; 5:2). Here, in 1 John, the status as God’s children is not simply a sign of the past or a future hope of Christ’s return, but a present reality: “For that is what we are ...” (1 John 3:1). Lest we miss that point, the author repeats it, along with another reminder of the believers’ beloved status: “Beloved, we are God’s children *now!* (1 John 3:1-2).

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This is good news indeed! In the midst of separation, and disagreement, it is not uncommon for a community (or individuals within it) to lose confidence in its ability to move faithfully into an unknown future. This is surely the situation facing our CBOQ family in these tumultuous days. It is too easy to get bogged down in questions of *what if* and fears about *what might be*? When old narratives and interpretations of scripture, and church practice, are offered for consideration, it is too much for some to cope, and they simply leave.

It sometimes is too painful for us to recognize that we had it wrong on all kinds of issues, and the choice comes down to adapting to the new reality or doubling down on the old. (see an excellent exposition of this in “Homo Deus” by Yuval Harari). Either choice comes with a cost and often that cost is unity. John urges the church, and we can be included in this, to examine what it looks like in our context to be God’s children now, already, in our particular time and place.

How is this church community already manifesting God’s love in its identity? In its actions? In the ways it is known to the community around it? On this day, what can the First Baptist congregation learn from the testimony of the saints of this place who have walked before us? How did those local ancestors of the faith live into their identity as children of God? The church need not gaze wistfully for a “someday” to come, in order to possess the fullness of its identity.

There is no need to wait until there are more members, or more resources, or more of whatever we might believe is necessary to be a good, or faithful, or missional (choose your favorite adjective!) church. Like the readers of 1 John, perhaps the people gathered for worship in today’s churches, could benefit from an occasional reminder that God has already bestowed upon them the thing that is most important for being the people they are called to be. They are children of God. Already. Today. Now.

Here I tread a thin line, perhaps, but John’s point is still valid and critical to us, especially given current realities. As important as theological concerns, biblical interpretation and church history, both locally and universally are; they are no excuse to avoid the need, the command, the pressing requirement that we be God’s people. And as John describes God as love, so too we must be people of love, first and foremost.

I stumbled across a wonderful piece that speaks deeply to this point. It takes the form of a letter written by one woman to a friend. It reads...

Dear Hannah —Yesterday I went for a run, taking advantage of the cool morning air in the middle of an unseasonably hot summer. As usual, I had my earbuds in, listening to a podcast, and because, many of the sidewalks in our city have shifted like tectonic plates, I had my eyes trained downward to keep from falling. We try to explain to others why they should care about the things we care about. What if instead we simply strained our own eyes toward the things that captivate us?

As I turned the corner to head north on Williams Street, I glanced up to see a neighbor standing in his yard, head tilted back, hand blocking the sun, eyes staring straight into the sky behind me. I slowed down, pulled out my earbuds, and craned my neck around just in time to see a majestic skein of geese flying overhead, honking encouragement to one another.

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Within a second or two they'd moved out of sight, and with a nod to my neighbor, I put the earbuds back in and resumed my pace. I wonder: What if the man had tried to wave me down, or pointed and tried to explain about the geese flying overhead? Likely, it would have taken me a while to realize he was talking to me or to understand what he was trying to say. I might have wondered why geese were so important to him anyway, and while I thought about it, I would have missed seeing those beautiful birds pass through the glass blue sky.

And then it got me thinking about the church, and all the issues and causes that stop us in our tracks and capture our attention. We try to explain to others why they should care about the things we care about. What if instead, like my neighbor, we simply strained our own eyes toward the things that captivate us? Do you think maybe others would see our resolve and start to look that way, too?

Or better yet, when our neighbors see us gazing skyward, what if they looked up and saw it was Jesus himself, we were looking at? Do you think it would make the cracks in the sidewalk and the voices from our earbuds—in other words, all those issues we get so passionate about—fade into the background a little?

BY CHARITY SINGLETON CRAIG, HANNAH ANDERSON

I really believe the church is in serious danger of losing all relevance to this world, because we are looking at the wrong thing. So much energy and time, and resources: are poured out to look for perceived stumbling blocks, or sticky traps. So much anger, frustration, and insinuation expressed: to get people to look down, instead of up to Christ. I have shared before about a group in Jesus' day called "Bleeding Pharisees".

These men were a very severe sect of Pharisaic tradition, which was strict, already. Bleeding Pharisees got their name from an odd habit they had picked up of walking around with their heads down, looking at their feet. As you can guess this led them to bump into things and thus cut themselves and bleed. Why did they do this? Well, they feared seeing a woman and being sorely tempted to have impure thoughts and break their vows.

It sounds ridiculous doesn't it. I think we have bleeding Christians. People so focused on what to avoid, lest they become impure, that they cannot see where Christ is leading them. Just like when someone loses a lot of blood, they are anemic. Their faith is anemic. Evidence of their being children of God is "conspicuous by its absence". They worry about the log in their brother or sister's eye but cannot be seen gazing upward at Jesus.

But I need temper my concern by examining my own faith and life. What am I focused on? It's hard to keep one's focus on the important things. Life seems to conspire to shift the ground on which we walk, so we look down, trying avoid the uneven path. Am I focused on my health, my finances, my troubled relationships, the news of the day, or on what my neighbour is doing, rather than who and whose I am?

As a society we are quite enamored with branding. Not just products and services but more to the point we like to label people. We think categorizing people is productive.

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Therefore, we catch just a little piece of what someone says, or does, or how they look, and we pigeon hole them. They are in our minds: a conservative, a radical, a liberal. They are lazy, a workaholic, a trouble maker. All of us have been labeled, and all of us have labeled someone else. The consequence of such a quick decision on little evidence, can destroy: people, relationships and yes, churches.

I came across an amusing story about a family intending to raise cattle, they were from New York City bought a ranch out West. When their friends visited, and inquired about the ranch's name, the would-be rancher replied: "I wanted to name it the Bar-J. My wife favored Suzy-Q, one of our sons wanted the Flying-W, and the other liked the Lazy-Y. So, we're calling it the Bar-J-Suzy-Q-Flying-W-Lazy-Y." "That's a mouth full, but where are all your cattle?" the friends asked. "None survived the branding."

I fear that we as a church will not survive the branding by this world and even by our fellow believers, if we let them decide who we are. We need to be recognized not by theological arguments or where we draw the line in the sand but rather, we need to be recognized by the love of God evidenced in our unity and our care for each other.