



A River Ride with 1 John: Texts of the Easter Season

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During a cold December interim at Luther Seminary, a number of students gathered with me early one morning to consider six texts from 1 John. In the midst of the deep December darkness of Advent we discussed texts that might be used for preaching during the more halcyon days of Easter. Overall, the study group was impressed with how 1 John seemed to reflect many of the themes raised by the Gospel of John. Still, while we noted a high degree of coherence between the two bodies of literature, we sensed little coincidence between them.

John's Gospel gives all the appearances of being historical narrative riding on a cushion of theology, while 1 John seems to be an extended sermon, deriving themes from the mother work but making its own way theologically. The six texts (for the six Sundays of the Easter season) cohere in subject matter as well as theme. The group thought that the sequence of texts might make for an interesting series of sermons, but some also felt that pastors would need to exercise some ingenuity because of the repetition of themes and ideas. Even so, all perceived an engaging development and progression-and more than a few surprises-as the alleged letter unfolded.

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The progressive yet repetitious quality of the narrative reminded some in the group of a concession at the Minnesota State Fair called "The River Ride." In late August when the fair is in session, fun seekers pay to take their places in a circular gondola at the head of a channeled but circuitous stream of rapidly flowing water. The gondola twists, dips, and turns, carrying riders over a series of drops beneath the surface. Water circulates under the vessel and splashes the riders from behind and in front. Yet, in spite of the soaking backwash, the pull of the stream is always forward toward a goal. In the end the riders emerge, drenched but satisfied, having been immersed, propelled, and surprised by both visible and invisible forces.

For the members of our study group the texts in 1 John had a similar unsettling effect. We, the readers, experienced the fast forward movement as well as unexpected backwash in the sequence of readings. We sensed that we were carried along on the swell; but we also had the repeated experience of being unexpectedly drenched by waves of ideas. However, we also had, at the end of the study, a sense of satisfaction with being engaged by the texts, a feeling of having been washed and propelled by both visible and invisible forces.

These texts from 1 John contain a continuous proclamation to an assumed congregation. It seems that the congregation perceived itself as being faithful to the received tradition, though that same body of believers was apparently beset by varied, perhaps even heretical, opinions from

within. These divergent views are never stated in the text and therefore have to be inferred, something Raymond Brown does at length in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979). As serious as those fissures were, however, they were not so openly inflammatory as those within the Corinthian congregation. That is, the issues were not over leadership or such matters as marriage or abuses of the Lord's supper.

Instead, the issues in this Johannine community were primarily christological—that is, the texts deal with divergent views, even secessionist views, about the person of Jesus. There is also some concern in the community about behavior, about eschatology, and about the role of the Spirit.

Second Sunday of Easter: 1 John 1:1-2:2

Even though all the parties in this community seem to be acquainted with the fourth Gospel, the divergent views were disturbing enough to cause the writer of 1 John to have to frame and defend his views repeatedly, if not repetitiously. In the first text, 1 John 1:1-2:2, there are noticeable echoes of John 1. The declaration here reaches back to the beginning, just as it does in John. The word of life, namely God's Son Jesus Christ, is the revealed source of life, the one who is to be proclaimed. This word is not disembodied; it is a tangible word, one that has been heard and seen and touched with the hands. The fact that this message has to be declared with an appeal to some received authority ("what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands") suggests that there are some things in the community that need to be clarified and set straight. One is reminded that Paul found it necessary to assert the source of his authority to gain a hearing for his views.

The truth that is being proclaimed requires ongoing and faithful testimony. The message must be proclaimed; it is not a private matter, something to be hoarded or kept under wraps. It is audible, visible, tangible truth, reaching back to the beginning of time. While the message is flexible, it is not polymorphous. That is, God's revealed word is not something that can be forced to assume any shape, depending on the prevailing fad or fancy. The message has important consequences in the life of the community. The community is expected to listen, act, and then testify to what they know about this word of life, a word that makes an ultimate claim. This received and revealed truth performs the dual function of bringing about fellowship among the members of the gathered body *and* fellowship with God.

It seems, though, that this dual fellowship in the community of 1 John was in some kind of trouble; divergent views were undermining the life and teaching of the community. Any community that confesses one thing and acts in a contrary manner is deceiving itself. If people know that God is light, yet act in shadowy ways, they undermine the very truth to which they testify. The writer presses this matter by constructing a series of parallel "if we" statements. If, for example, we say we have fellowship while walking in darkness, we lie. This blunt language points to insincerity, even hypocrisy among the members of the community. It is language well adapted for the confession of sins.

How can we have fellowship with God (who is light) while walking in darkness? How can we say we have no sin when we are sinners? We lie if we do these things, and the truth, which we confess, is not in us. By denying that we are sinners, not only are we liars, but we make

God out to be a liar as well. It is bad enough that we should be liars; it is truly ludicrous to make God, who is truth, a liar. What we say and do, then, are not matters to be taken lightly; they have serious consequences. Our confession and action not only demonstrate what we are, but they also reveal what we really think God is. Making God a liar by our smug activity separates us from the truth. Consequently, the word is not in us.

Fortunately, the text goes on beyond this desultory conclusion. The writer doubtless draws the line sharply in order to make a greater truth clear. While we cannot escape our sinfulness, we are assured that if we do sin, we have an advocate who will plead our case. The one who is righteous, Jesus Christ, does for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. He makes reparation and brings about harmony between us and God and between us and other members of the community. And there is more.

Perhaps reflecting the great theme at the end of John 20, the author proposes that the atoning work of Jesus is not just for the sins of the community to whom these words are addressed. The atoning sacrifice of Jesus is for the sins of the world. Jesus is not some local hero. He is one whose life has affected the life of the world. One sure and certain implication of this conviction is that believers should be prepared to act on what they have heard and then to share the good news with the wider community. We are forgiven and freed to testify to the whole world.

In this text the reader is made aware of the truth of God in Jesus as well as the

lack of truth in ourselves. If we are not honest to God and with one another we practice deception. If we deal with the dark side we destroy fellowship and make the saving truth into a great lie, something to be avoided at all costs. The good news is that if we recognize and confess our sin, God will forgive and the Son will restore. This is a message of light and truth for the whole world.

Third Sunday of Easter: 1 John 3:1-7

The text from 1 John 3:1-7 repeats and expands themes from the first text. By now it is presumed that we know who we are (God's children) and what we should be about in this life (not deluding ourselves, but relying on Christ). Matters of behavior still occupy the author's attention in this continuing narrative. Those who abide in sin deny God. Those who are righteous should act in a righteous manner as befits children of God. In other words, we are called to act according to what we confess. If we consider ourselves to be children of God, then we are obliged to act that way.

One or two puzzles in this text caused our study group some difficulty. By sinning, the text affirms, we are guilty of lawlessness, for sin is lawlessness. But here is a conundrum: if we are not lawless, are we therefore sinless? This dodge is often raised by people who do not want to deal with the radical quality of sin. We feel we are excused if we behave well. But this way of thinking is reminiscent of many arguments that Jesus (and later Paul) had with those who tried to excuse themselves on grounds of good behavior. The spike has already been driven into this argument by the writer of 1 John when he states clearly that if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves. There are no free passes in this matter; there is no time off for good behavior.

But the conundrum raises a second difficulty. Earlier the author says that if we sin, we

have an advocate in Jesus—a comforting thought. Here, though, the author states that anyone who sins neither sees nor knows Jesus, a disquieting thought. Unable easily to resolve this dilemma, members of the study group pondered the deeper issue of self-deception. We often think we have it made if we confess; we often presume that God will forgive if we merely talk the talk of confession and forgiveness; we often claim to be in fellowship with Christ and with one another while negating that fellowship by our actions. We seem always to want to keep the back door open in order to escape the world at the front door. But this self-protection, too, is delusion: not only do we sink all the more deeply in our sin, we also reject the Christ who is righteous. Christ bids us to *be* righteous, not just to talk about being righteous. We may be able to fool ourselves some of the time, but we are never able to fool God.

This text strikes a new note. An expectant sense of the future is apparent in 1 John 3:2-3. Our discussion group, in reading those verses, scented eschatology. What we will be has not yet been revealed, though a conviction exists that God's love, when realized in the community and in the world, produces a resemblance to God both now and in time to come. This conviction is like the hope expressed by Paul in 1 Cor 13:12. And it is a point worth considering. We do know that God is

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for us, but we do not yet know fully what that means. For the present, we live secure in the revelation of God's love. But we also have confidence in that which has not yet fully been revealed. In time, when God is revealed, we will be like God. Here is hope not only for the present. This is a word of expectation about the future.

Fourth Sunday of Easter: 1 John 3:16-24

The sacrificial love that was affirmed in verse 1 is referred to and amplified in 1 John 3:16-24. When we considered this third text, our group was surprised at the number of connections we found with other parts of scripture. References here to Jesus' sacrificial love recall the extensive reflection of Jesus with his disciples in John 15. Failure to respond to a brother or sister in need echoed images that appear in the sermon on the mount (especially Matt 5:21-26). The rhetoric in 1 John seems to be reminiscent of judgmental images that Jesus invokes in Matt 25:31-46. When the 1 John text urges action that is contrary to the world's standards, we were reminded of the time when Paul talked about not being conformed to this world (Rom 12:1-2). Taken together, these words of scripture constitute a discomfiting message for a self-centered, goods-oriented people.

If the measure of a society is in its ability to live in a self-sacrificing mode, then no society (certainly not our own) would measure up. To an overwhelming degree our materiality is curved in on itself. Living as Christ would have us live—by laying down our lives for one another—is a countercultural word that arises out of the text. Love is more than lip service; it is action-oriented. We are called to love not in word or speech, but in truth and action. In matters of love, actions speak louder than words.

Still, we do need words for the message to get out. The words of Jesus from John 13:34 and 15:17 are recalled here in the commandment to love one another. This commandment to love has a paradoxical ring to it, for strictly speaking one cannot actually be *commanded* to love. One can command a dog to obey or a computer to print. But love springs from a different source.

According to the author of 1 John that source is the reciprocal relation between Jesus and the community he gave himself for. As Christ laid down his life for us, we sacrifice ourselves for others. In such sacrificial love, Christ abides in us and we in him.

Fifth Sunday of Easter: 1 John 4:7-21

The author speaks further on the nature of that sacrificial love in 1 John 4:7-21. In this text we are deeply immersed in the theme. So important is love at this point that the author repeats the word more than twenty-five times in these fifteen verses. Love is what makes this text go 'round: love is from God; love unites us to God and to one another; love is a critical demonstration of God's relation and commitment to us; love is intimately connected with our belief in God; love gives us confidence to face the day of judgment; love is a sign not only of affection but also of commitment in the believing community; love is what believers do for one another because of what God has done for them.

It is important not to confuse this dynamic of love with the sentimentality

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that passes for love in our culture. What is affirmed here makes our customary talk of love sound thin and gaseous by comparison. The kind of love initially regarded as sacrificial love (as in John 3:16) has assumed awesome dimensions here. For one thing, love is regarded as constitutive for the community of believers. If we do not love, we cannot know God—which is like saying that without oxygen we would not be able to breathe. Having initially drawn breath, though, we are obliged to continue breathing and acting in love. Loving one another is mentioned several times in this text. We recognize it as something we do because we have first been loved by God.

Recognition of love leads to confession of love. Because of the love that God has shared with us in sending the Son (a clear echo of John 3:16), we are able to know and believe and testify to what God has done for us. Abiding in love, we abide in God and confess that the Father has sent the Son as the savior of the world. Again, love leads us to confess. But then confession drives us into mission. The primary force of love loops around and immerses us once again in the eschatological dimension. That is, love calls us to the humanly impossible task of having no fear in this life and going forth in boldness in the day of judgment. We confess that God who spoke and acted in love at the beginning will fortify the people at the end, a word of inestimable comfort. In the most profound sense it may be said that God's word is lovely to behold, for it is love incarnate.

Sixth Sunday of Easter: 1 John 5:1-6

The author of 1 John is not done with love, for he extends the conversation further in 1 John 5:1-6. Here, though, he actually equates the love of God with obedience to God's commandments. Ordinarily, when people obey a command, there is fear or resentment. If a police officer commands me to pull to the side of the road, even if it is for my own safety, I usually react with cold sweat. It is different with the commands of God, as this text avers. In this context the commandments are linked to God's love. The emphasis here is quite clearly on the uplifting quality of obedience to God's commandments. As if to echo Matt 11:30, we hear that God's commandments are not burdensome at all. Quite the contrary, they fortify us and enable us to conquer the world. For people looking for a way to survive or cope in the world, it is shockingly

good news to hear that by obeying God's commandments they are born of God and can overcome the world. This word speaks of empowerment and uplift.

While we have already noted that 1 John is concerned with christology, among other things, the author also raises the matter of life in the Spirit. The Spirit has been mentioned several times in these texts (1 John 3:24; 4:13). Now we hear that the Spirit testifies to the activity of Jesus, the one who came by water and blood. Jesus who was baptized and crucified is known to the community by the witness of the Spirit, for the Spirit is truth. To listen to the Spirit is to be pointed in several directions at the same time. The Spirit points to the historical Jesus and his saving action for us. At the same time the Spirit enables us to live in the present without despair, for we are never left without resources or strength. Moreover, the

Spirit beckons us into the future, a beacon of hope in a dark world. The multidimensional Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is truth.

Seventh Sunday of Easter: 1 John 5:9-13

Proclaiming and testifying to what had been received were pivotal matters at the beginning of this epistle. As our discussions drew to a close, the participants in our morning study group saw the importance of these activities at the end of the epistle as well. 1 John 5:9-13 makes a distinction between human testimony and the testimony of God, both being crucial, but the latter being greater. The words of human beings are important to the hearing of the word. They are the vessels of communication without which there can be no understanding.

Yet the testimony of God rests in the supreme deed of giving the Son. This action is both positive and convincing, for what God says and does is true. It must be the truth, for if it were not, then God is a liar—a thought refuted earlier in 1:8, 10; 2:4. Further, it is important to understand that God's testimony becomes ours; we say to others what God first and persuasively said to us. The word surely is meant to comfort and inspire—and, at times, to provoke and cause discomfort. But the rousing conclusion to the letter of 1 John regards this word as something of much more far-reaching worth.

In the end the testimony is that God has given us eternal life, and those who know the Son know not only the Father, they also know and experience eternal life. Coming to this conviction is like coming to the end of "The River Ride" during which we have experienced the bracing currents of christology, the dizzying loops and patterns of community life, the lively and life-giving presence of the Spirit, and the surprise and expectation of eschatology. Like the creeds which Christians confess, the author of 1 John concludes by focusing on witness and eternal life, the goals of the journey from the beginning. These things are written so that we may believe and in our turn bear witness to one another and to the world. We bear witness because we know the Son of God is the one who has and gives eternal life.