



The Word of Life in the Witness of the Cross*

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The Christian community is called to live in the shadow of the cross, and the gospel traditions draw us into this reality dramatically so during the season of Lent. Passion Sunday drew us into Jesus' entry to Jerusalem and the final week of his life. On the cross of Good Friday we saw the Son of man lifted up (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34) as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). We are the recipients of the gift of life in Jesus' death, which is the completion of the Father's work. Jesus' final word from the cross in the Fourth Gospel expresses this: “It is accomplished/completed/fulfilled” (*tetelestai*). Having spoken his last, Jesus bows his head and hands over his “spirit/wind/breath” (*pneuma*, John 19:30).

Standing in the shadow of the cross is one whose witness is yet to be heard. Seeing that Jesus is already dead, the soldiers do not break his legs but lance his side with a spear “and at once there came out blood and water” (John 19:34). To this event of the cross is heard the final witness: “The one who has seen this has borne witness, and his witness is true, and that one knows that he speaks the truth, that you also might believe” (19:35). This final witness will become the primary witness of the Johannine community, a witness which we meet in 1 John in the season of Easter.

In the early church the festival of Easter was observed with Baptism. According to the imagery of Paul, we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, “so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). As we enter the season of Easter it is also a time for us to reflect on the identity that is ours as we have been buried with Christ in the waters of Baptism and raised from the waters to

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newness of life. In this life we walk in the shadow of the cross and the light of the resurrection. The writing of 1 John is instructional for our walk; it provides a catechetical instruction for the church into the central reality of life in the world as God's beloved children.

The six texts from 1 John during the Sundays of Easter are 5:1-6; 1:1-2:2; 3:1-2; 3:18-24; 4:1-11 and 4:13-21. As our exegetical conversation took place, we followed the order of the texts in 1 John and worked toward 5:1-6. When we arrived at our final text, we realized that we were once again at the heart of both the Gospel of John and 1 John—the cross. We had never left the shadow of the cross projected onto the life of the Johannine community from the gospel, but we

had also entered into this shadow within the epistle. And this is as it should be, even in the season of Easter.

The cross and resurrection are inseparable in the Fourth Gospel and 1 John. The triumph of the cross in the gospel indeed expresses the reality of Easter morn. That is to say that a theology of the cross is inseparable from a theology of resurrection. God's glory or presence (*doxa*) is most fully known in the cross event. This is not to be mistaken for a theology of triumphalism, for it is precisely in Jesus' death that God's love is most fully known. It is upon this theology that 1 John builds, reflecting the gospel tradition for the life of the church in the time following the death and resurrection of Jesus.

2nd Sunday of Easter: 1 John 5:1-6, Faith in Christ

One of the first things we observe in this text is that the text begins with the confession, "Jesus is the Christ" (5:1), continues with the confession, "Jesus is the Son of God" (5:5), and concludes with the confession, "this is the one who has come in the water and in the blood" (5:6). This living witness is confessed by the church in the Spirit for "the Spirit is the truth" (5:6).

These confessions are the foundation for our texts from 1 John on these Sundays. We begin at the conclusion of 1 John, for it is here that we are at the heart of the reality of faith in Christ. This is the *sola fide* of our heritage—Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, the one who has come by water and blood. The Gospel of John concludes with two purposeful statements that encompass the gospel. The first expresses the central reality of faith, "...that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God"; and the second encompasses the reality of life in Christ, "...and that believing you might have life in his name" (20:31). Around these two foci the Gospel of John has been composed—faith and life. These are the same foci for 1 John: "I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13).

In this faith we have been given the gift of life as parents give life to a child (5:1). And in this relationship we know ourselves to be the children of God as we live in love toward God (5:2). Out of the life of faith comes forth the life of love, a love that finds the source of life in the commandments of God. God's love is revealed in these commandments, which have been set into a framework of love: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exod 20:2). God's deliverance of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt is the story of the loving and redeeming God whose commandments call Israel into a life of relationship with the God of love (Exod

20:3-17). We could ask of the first commandment, "Why would Israel want other gods before this God, the God who acts in love?" And the rest of the commandments follow, expressing the way in which God lovingly provides for life in relationship to God and the neighbor. As 1 John expresses it, "his commandments are not burdensome" (5:3).

From this gift of life and love has come the reality of an empowerment that is not our own: "For whatever has been begotten of God conquers the world; and this is the conquering power which conquered the world, our faith" (5:4). God's gift of power is above every power system of our world—not only Israel's enslavement in Egypt, but all that would enslave us today. We have been freed. And this gift is centered in faith. It is interesting to note that the noun, faith

(*pistis*), which occurs so frequently in the Pauline letters, appears only here in the Gospel of John and 1 John. In the Gospel of John the verb “to believe” (*pisteuein*) occurs 98 times; and it appears nine times in 1 John. The single occurrence of the noun “faith” comes at the climactic moment in 1 John, for the identity of the conquering power of faith is centered in the one who believes “Jesus is the Son of God” (5:5).

The heart of this faith is in the one “who has come through water and blood, Jesus Christ” (5:6). Many interpreters have seen water here as a reference to Jesus’ baptism and blood as a reference to Jesus’ death. But the witness in the Gospel of John to the blood and the water flowing forth from Jesus’ lanced side (19:34) appears to be a more natural reference; both center upon that which is at the heart of the gospel tradition, Jesus’ death. But even here 1 John recognizes that “the Spirit is the one who witnesses” (5:6). Luther’s explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed expresses this truth: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me.” The gift of faith and the gift of witness is the work of God’s empowering and conquering Spirit.

In this gift we are called to life in the world, not in fear (John 20:19), but in the peace and breath of the Risen One whose breath/spirit has given us new life and who has spoken the word, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:19-22). Thomas’ absence from this event draws us into the life of the resurrected Christ, for in showing Thomas the wounds inflicted by the nails and lance, we hear the climactic confession, “My Lord and my God” (20:28), and the promise to Jesus’ followers: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (20:29).

The word of the Risen Christ is ours in this Easter season, and it is upon this blessing that the Gospel of John has been written with its twofold purpose (20:30-31). The gift of faith in Christ is a way of living in the world; it is the way of the Spirit. It is living in the empowering vertical relationship with God that we might live in the horizontal relationship of love with one another. To the dimensions of this reality we now turn in the remaining five texts from 1 John.

3rd Sunday of Easter: 1 John 1:1-2:2, Communion with Christ

The word of life (1:1) is that “God is light” (1:5). Into our world of darkness and sin has come a word which identifies us as God’s “dear children” (2:1), who are not alone in this world but have an advocate (*paraclete*, one who stands beside us and upon whom we can call) with the Father. This word of life

is centered in Jesus Christ, the righteous one through whom is atonement not only for our sins, but those of the entire world (2:2). These concluding verses of our text bring to a climactic moment the words of the prologue (1:1-4), the announcement that “God is light” (1:5), and the false (1:6,8, 10) and true confessions (1:7, 9; 2:1-2).

The prologue (1:1-4) would certainly be enough in itself on which to focus, for its rich imagery and thought is to be likened to the prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-18). The “from the beginning” (1:1) not only recalls the opening words of Genesis and John, but reflects a uniqueness of its own. In 1 John the “beginning” is the life and ministry of Jesus, and concerning this is heard the confessional witness of the community in the first person plural verbs: “we have heard” (1:1, 3), “we have seen” (1:1, 2, 3), “we looked upon and touched” (1:1), “we are witnessing” (1:2), and “we are announcing” (1:2, 3). The word of life has been revealed (1:2)

with the purpose that “our joy may be fulfilled” (1:4). This is why 1 John has been written, for the gospel has been heard, even from him (Jesus Christ), and it is this good news that is being announced: “God is light and in him is no darkness at all” (1:5).

How is this good news to be lived out? The confessions in 1:6-2:2 continue the first person plural style, contrasting the false confessions (1:6, 8, 10) with the true confessions (1:7, 9; 2:1-2). As one hears the false confessions one notes the growing darkness first of all, to say that one is in communion with God and to continue in darkness is to live a lie and not be in the truth (1:6). Second, to say that we are not in sin is to move into even deeper darkness and deception, expressing that the truth is not in us (1:8). Finally, to say that one has not sinned is to move into the darkest of sin and to make a liar of God, the one who knows the depth of our sin, and thus to show that God’s word is not in us (1:10). The progression of the false confessions has taken us into the depth of darkness.

In contrast, the true confessions express the growing brilliance of God’s light. First of all, to walk in the light—as Jesus is in the light—is to live in communion (*koinonia*) with one another in the reality that Jesus’ blood cleanses us from all sin (1:7). Second, to confess our sins is to experience in Jesus the one who is faithful and righteous, the one who both forgives our sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness (1:9). Finally, the author breaks the sequence with the address of endearment, “my dear children,” noting that the purpose of writing is that the readers might be free from the power of sin through the one who is an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ. In the Father’s righteous one there is atonement for sin for all people.

The power of these words is paradoxical. For the good news is that in Jesus Christ there is empowerment over the darkness and depth of sin. This is not just a covering of sin, but it is a removal of sin. Seen in the light of Christ’s righteousness, the sin of our lives is transparent. To walk in the light is to be exposed to the dark reality of sin and the light of Christ’s cleansing. As with Adam and Eve, we don’t want the exposure of our sin to be seen by God, and we attempt to hide from God. In Jesus Christ, our advocate with the Father, we are freed to walk even in the light of the exposure of sin, knowing that in him is forgiveness and cleansing. We are freed to live for the other.

4th Sunday of Easter: 1 John 3:1-2, Confidence in Christ

Chapter two of 1 John concludes with an exhortation to live in the identity of Christ (“and now dear children, abide in him”), for in this identity there is confidence for the day of Christ’s coming (2:28). Until the day of Christ’s coming we live in the faith that when Christ is revealed we shall be like him. On that day we shall see him as he is (3:2). But until that day comes, we live in the confidence that is ours in Christ. This confidence empowers us to live in freedom in the world, free to live in love toward one another. The identity is a given. We are not only called “children of God,” but we are. The identity is a bestowed identity by God, as Father. We are incorporated into the family of God. This identity is not something by which the world knows us, for the world stands apart from the one through whom this reality is established.

What does this mean for the Christian community? Does this mean that we retreat from the world which does not know us and has little or no interest in us? What is our identity in the world if we are unknown? The Gospel text for this Sunday centers upon the identity of the community in the world. Our identity is only to be found in the one who is the Good Shepherd,

the one who has laid down his life for the sheep. Unlike one who would flee when danger is present, this Shepherd knows his own, and he lays down his life for the lives of his sheep. But it does not just end with commitment to the fold; there are “other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also” (John 10:16). The community under the Shepherd lives not to itself, but for the other. The Shepherd brings the sheep into dangerous territory each day because it is here that they must find nourishment for their lives. The area of grazing within the protection of the sheepfold is soon consumed, but to venture out on one’s own is to be completely vulnerable to the dangers of open pasture. And it is here that we see the remarkable identity of the Shepherd and the sheep. Left to their own, the sheep will wander into untold dangers, and it is precisely in this situation that the Shepherd is needed, for he is the only one who has the power (*exousia*) to enter into the world to lay down his life and to take it again. Such power can come only from the Shepherd whose power is a received power from the Father.

This is the identity of the child of God. It is an image that is as powerful as one could imagine and it is also an image that is as intimate and loving as one could imagine. The church’s life in the world is as vulnerable and dangerous as the life of sheep in open pasture. But as sheep have a shepherd, the children have a Father. This is the good news; this is the confidence that is ours in Christ. The confidence is not based on a visible reality, but in the hiddenness of the cross—in the one whose life has been laid down—that we might live in confidence toward God. In this confidence we are called to live in the world, free to live for the other sheep who are not of the Father’s fold. This is to live in the identity and likeness of the Shepherd, whom we shall see just as he is. Until that day we live in the identity of knowing him as our Shepherd and in the confidence of his word, “I know my own and my own know me” (John 10:14).

5th Sunday of Easter: 1 John 3:18-24, Commandment of Christ

“Dear children, we ought to love not in word and in speech, but in deed and in truth” (3:18). The lectionary text opens with a transition verse, con-

cluding the previous section (3:11-18) and introducing our text. The exhortation to love is predicated on Jesus who laid down his life for us, as expressed in 1 John 3:16, and included in the Gospel for last Sunday (John 10:11-18). On the basis of God’s gift of love in the laying down of Jesus’ life for the sheep, “not in word or speech,” the “dear children” of God are called to live in the empowering reality of Christ’s love “in deed and in truth.”

By ourselves we are unable to love, and it is here that we again draw upon the Gospel text. The relationship between the vine and the branches is organic in the way that branches are dependent upon the stalk or trunk for their life. Similarly, members of the Christian community are dependent upon Christ for the source of life which issues forth in the fruit of love: “I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who abides in me, and I in him, this one bears much fruit, for apart from me you are unable to do anything” (John 15:5).

On the basis of this relationship we have confidence toward God, as 1 John announces (3:21). Living in this relationship certifies “that we are of the truth” (3:19), and it is this relationship that is our reassurance when we doubt and even condemn ourselves. The empowering word is that “God is greater than our heart and knows everything” (3:20). In calling upon God and keeping God’s commandments, we are living out the reality of the relationship

that God has established; it is this that is pleasing to God (3:22). The Gospel text adds that abiding in the vine and the words of Jesus is to live in the faith that whatever we ask shall be done for us (15:7). In this faith the “Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples” (15:8).

Living in the commandment of God and bearing fruit are parallel in our texts. In 1 John the commandment is twofold. First, it is believing in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and second, loving one another. The twofold reality recalls both Israel’s *Shema* (“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might,” Deut 6:4) and Jesus’ addition: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18; cf. Mark 12:29-31). In the Johannine community, to believe in the name of God’s Son is to live in God’s love, and to love one another is to live in the promise that comes from the freedom of God’s love.

To live in the reality of God’s love not only in word and speech is the call to live in deed and in truth. Abiding in God’s love we are called to live “by his Spirit which he gave to us” (3:24). This is the first reference to the Spirit in 1 John, a word which will occur twelve more times in chapters four and five. The deed and truth of our lives has its source in God’s commandment of love, and in the reality of life in the true vine, Jesus Christ. From this source and identity the Holy Spirit is the operative power in our lives. As branches of the true vine, our lives bear the fruit of God’s Spirit. Paul expresses this so powerfully: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control” (Gal 5:22-23).

The call in the text of 1 John is predicated on God’s claim on our lives. We are called not to triumphalism, but to service centered in Jesus Christ, who has come among us to serve and not be served. In this we are led by the Spirit. Believing and loving are inseparable; they are two parts of the one reality of living in the commandment of Christ.

6th Sunday of Easter; 1 John 4:1-11, Confessing Christ

The readings from 1 John and the Gospel of John are continuous readings from the previous Sunday. This Sunday the focus is on the confession of Christ. Last week we noted the first occurrence of the work of the Spirit in 1 John. For this Sunday we note that there are many spirits in our world. Because of this, the spirits need to be examined or tested to see if they are of God’s Spirit or those of false prophets.

The community of 1 John is addressed directly: “Every spirit which confesses, ‘Jesus has come in the flesh,’ is of God; but every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God” (4:2-3). The prologue of John’s Gospel remains at the heart of the Christian proclamation and confession: “The word became flesh, and dwelt (encamped) among us, and we beheld his glory (presence), glory as of the only one from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14). This confession is at the heart of confessing Christ and is the central criterion in 1 John. Anything apart from this confession is of the “antichrist” (literally: in the place of Christ, instead of Christ).

The incarnation is a word about God’s glory/presence in the world in Jesus Christ, but it is also a word that stands over against the world. The conquering of the spirits that stand opposed to the Spirit of Christ is a very real word in this text (4:4-6). The power of God’s Spirit is greater, but still the spirit of deceit continues its presence and persuasion in the world. In contrast to the

spirit of deceit, the Spirit of truth is centered in the incarnate one in whom God's word of love has been made known.

The Spirit of truth makes known God's word in Christ as we hear in the Gospel of John (14:17; 15:26; 16:13). "In this way we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit" (1 John 4:6)—this is the promise by which the community in 1 John lives in the world. This is also true for us. Making this word known is as intimate as the image of the vine and the branches in the continuing Gospel text from John 15:9-17. To abide in the Father's love is to live in the fulness of the joy God promises.

Our joy is centered in the promise that we did not choose God, but God has chosen us (John 15:16). But this choosing has come not only at great cost through the one who has laid down his life for us; we too are called to lay down our lives for our friends. As servants we are not greater than the master. With God's choosing has come the identity of life in the vine to bear fruit, a fruit that remains God's doing as we live in the promise of loving one another.

Once again the love spoken of is centered in the truth that "love is of God" because "God is love" (1 John 4:8). God's love has been revealed in his only Son for the purpose that we might live in him (4:9), and that we might receive atonement for our sins (4:10). Because of God's love, we hear the final word of the text as exhortation and promise: "Beloved, if God has loved us [and God has], we ought to love one another" (4:11). The implied condition in this verse is in fact reality, God has loved us, and on the basis of the surety of this proclamation we are empowered and called to love one another. Both texts from 1 John and the Gospel end on the same note—"to love one another."

7th Sunday of Easter: 1 John 4:13-21, Abiding in Christ

There is a single verse omitted between last Sunday's reading from 1 John and the continuation this Sunday: "No one has ever seen God. When we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (4:12). Why should such a verse be omitted? It is part of the continuing thought of 1 John and expresses a powerful word about the presence of God's love in our world. Once again the presence of God's love is centered in Jesus Christ. Our text begins with the announcement, "By this we know that we are abiding in him and he in us, for he has given us of his own Spirit" (4:13). God's love is perfected in us through the work of God's Spirit. From this Spirit "the fruit of the Spirit" comes forth (Gal 5:22-23).

The confession in 1 John is that "we have seen and we are witnessing" the presence of God's love in the affirmation: "The Father has sent the Son as the Savior of the world" (4:14). In the Gospel of John this confession is heard from the lips of the Samaritans, bringing Jesus' visit to Samaria to a climactic conclusion: "This is truly the Savior of the world" (4:42). To this confession 1 John adds the confession, "Jesus is the Son of God" (4:15). Our text finds its center around these confessions. To know Jesus Christ in this way is "to know and believe the love which God has for us. God is love" (4:16). To live in this knowledge is to live in confidence of the day of judgment and to live in the promise that God's love in Christ has driven out fear. To live in fear is to anticipate punishment and to live apart from the perfection of God's love in Christ.

"We love because he first loved us." God's love is the source of empowerment to love our brother and sister (4:19-20). To live in hate is to live as a liar. To abide in Christ is always

related to love for the other; it is a dynamic abiding to which we are called. As we abide with God in Christ, Christ comes bringing the other. Not to love one's sister and brother is not to love God: The positive relationship is the heart of the text, and it is upon this note that the reading concludes. Those who love God also love their sisters and brothers (4:21).

On the basis of this call and hope we hear the Gospel reading for today from Jesus' prayer for the Christian community. We hear only the middle third of the prayer, but it is in these verses that we note a distinctive pattern which focuses on three prepositions: "in" (*en*) at 17:11-13, "of" or "from" (*ek*) at 17:14-16, and "into" (*eis*) at 17:17-19. In this pattern we see and experience the relationship of love that God has established in Jesus Christ. In these three prepositions we see the source of the church's life in the world. First, the community is called to live "in the world," which takes place "in the Father's name"; this is the source of our love (17:11-13). Second, the community is called not to be "of/from the world" for its source of life is not "of/from the world." The truth of the community's life is that it is kept "from the evil one" (17:14-16). Third, the community is sent "into the world," even as Christ was sent "into the world" (17:17-19). In this calling, identity, and sending, the community lives as the sanctified ones, the ones with whom God is present "in the truth" of God's word in Christ (17:17-19). In this truth we abide in the world in Christ.