

Being the Church at Brentwood

Faith in the World

**Ps 98 & 1 John 5:1-6
(Hymns – 764, 404, My Jesus, I love thee, 366)**

May 13, 2012

The community in Ephesus, on what's now the west coast of Turkey,
to whom the Elder wrote –
that's what the writer calls himself in the 2nd and 3rd letters of John -
was a small minority in a hostile or indifferent society.
It was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire,
a major port and commercial centre.

Very much like us.

We are clearly a small community.
The statistics tell us that Christians are declining in numbers in North America,
especially Christians of the Presbyterian variety.
The society around us is largely indifferent to Christianity,
though in some cases people are openly hostile,
especially if they have suffered some kind of abuse
from people and institutions associated with Christianity.
We are rich in material resources, especially property,
but dwindling in human resources,
as the membership in most mainline denomination ages.

This is a tough time to be a Christian community.
Our Christian faith is being tested in and by the world.

How well we hold fast to the confession of our hope in Jesus Christ,
how deeply and firmly we abide in his grace and truth,
how lively we are in blessing our neighbourhood and the world around us,
will determine our vitality as a congregation.

If we simply focus on how others see us,
how others feel about us,
whether others are willing to join us,
then our confidence in Jesus Christ will get pretty discouraged.

We will fall further into an attitude that Gordon Haynes,
the retiring Associate Secretary for Canada Ministries,
finds across The Presbyterian Church in Canada
and calls “despairing lethargy.”
It’s the lack of energy that comes from being drained of hope.

If we simply try to appeal to the social norms
that are prevalent in North America –
individualism, political polarization,
consumerism, environmental disregard,
religious extremism and exclusivism, self-indulgence –
then our faithfulness to Jesus Christ will get pretty distorted.
We will compromise God’s revelation in Jesus Christ
in order to be popular and successful.

If we simply try to withdraw from the world,
try to huddle together in fear of change,
try to preserve the old ways,
try to protect and prolong the old days,
then our service to Jesus Christ will get pretty disabled.
We will fall into the primary trap
that the Elder finds in this small Christian community near Ephesus,
and that is the Gnostic idea of rejecting the world
to be in mystic union with God.

What The Elder is saying in these writings –
1 John is probably a sermon or address,
2 John a letter to a congregation,
and 3 John a letter to an individual –
is that abiding in a relationship with the God
who came in flesh in Jesus Christ
and continues to work within us and among us through the Holy Spirit
is what really encourages, enlightens, and enables us
to live full and flourishing lives of love.

Abiding in the love of Jesus Christ,
and allowing it to shape and flow through everything we do as disciples –
that’s what faithful obedience is for the Elder.

It is the core message of John’s Gospel as well.
Our flourishing begins with a loving relationship
Initiated by the God who came became flesh in Jesus Christ
to reconcile us and the whole world
in order that we might become again
the blessings we were created to be.

In this sermon in 1 John, The Elder is urging and encouraging his brothers and sisters in Christ in this community near Ephesus to live their faith in all its flourishing fullness in their world. He is urging them to be witnesses to the promise and power of the God who invites them to abide with him, whom they have come to know in Jesus Christ, this God who took flesh and blessed all humanity in the earthly Christ and who remains with us in the constant work of the Holy Spirit.

Note the Elder's emphasis on the water of baptism and the blood of the crucifixion. These are concrete earthly elements, signs that God came in the flesh and dwelt among human beings, full of the grace and truth he wanted all his human creatures to enjoy themselves abiding in him in this life, as well as the next.

The Elder is emphasizing the physical, earthly presence of God in Jesus Christ to counter the Gnostic ideas we mentioned earlier, the ideas of a party within the early church who declared all earthly things to be bad and thought salvation involved a mystic union with God in another realm.

Most of us experience this kind of concrete, physical, this-worldly love as we abide in the love of our mothers. While never reaching the perfection of God's love in Jesus Christ, the motherly love that we celebrate today is marked at its best by the patience, kindness, generosity, and concern that nourish flourishing lives.

When that motherly love abides in the grace and truth of Jesus Christ, its resilience is remarkable.

When congregations like this welcome and nurture people into a mature faith with that motherly love, the results in the world are remarkable.

As the first and last verses of our Hymn of the Month say:

*There's a Spirit in the air,
calling people everywhere:
praise the love that Christ revealed,
living, working in the world.*

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