

The Letter of 1 John is more like a sermon than a letter. 2 & 3 John (which come right after 1 John...), are great examples of ancient letters. 1 John is more like a sermon but it does look & sound a lot like the Gospel of John. Most scholars agree that it's written from at least the same community as John's Gospel, if not the same author. Some even think 1 John was written before the Gospel, and the Gospel expands on 1 John.

Whatever their connection, the Gospel & Letters of John sound like they belong together. The Gospel begins like this: "In the *beginning* was the *Word*," (Jn 1:1). The Letter of 1 John begins like this: "We declare to you what was from the *beginning*... concerning the *word*," (1Jn 1:1). In the beginning was the word; from the beginning concerning the word. Their vocab is similar all the way through.

I'll even teach you one of the words they share in common. When I gesture, repeat after me: μένω. Say it again. It means: remain, stay, or abide. It's a word that appears 117x in the New Testament. More than half (66x) of those occurrences are found in the Gospel & Letters of John alone. Μένω is one of their signature terms. Μένω [gesture]

What we know about the Gospel & Letters of John is that they were probably written to Christians near Ephesus; a port city in modern Turkey. They're written somewhere around the end of the 1st ce. or beginning of the 2nd ce. In other words, about 60 or 70 yrs. after the resurrection of Jesus. By the time John is writing there's been enough time for followers of Jesus to live with some hard

questions. Questions like: what does it *mean* to follow Jesus 70 yrs. after the resurrection when the world still looks the same? What does it mean to live with the clarity of resurrection but the complexity of our world?

The Gospel & Letters of John respond to that. Here's how. They invite us back to the basics. They revel in what we call archetypes; those primitive images we understand from an early age but as we grow they grow with us, revealing new depths and meaning. They revel in simplicity & depth. The language we hear today is about vines & branches. Simple to understand. But you can spend a lifetime pondering the depths. It's been said that John's writings are shallow enough for a child, and deep enough for an elephant.

In a world of complexity & uncertainty, John invites us back to the basics. Consider this. A couple of weeks ago *The Washington Post* ran an article called, *The science of being there: Why face-to-face meetings are so important*.¹ There's nothing simpler than meeting someone face-to-face. From the moment we're born, we're meeting people face-to-face. But as we grow, life gets more complicated. These days we even have have technology that seems to "replace" face-to-face meetings. We can pull up a video screen on demand and see someone whenever we want, wherever they are in the world. Maybe "being" with someone face-to-face is something different in our world.

Maybe. But here's the thing. That article in the *Post* works exactly the same

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/brand-connect/hilton/the-science-of-being-there/>

was as the writings of John. The article invites us back to the basics of face-to-face meetings. “Research shows time and again there’s simply no substitute for meeting face to face.... [Turns out] ’It’s [necessary to create] the psychological safety that people need...in order to engage and participate fully.’” Once you say it, it’s the most obvious thing in the world —of course we need to be fully present if we’re going to fully participate. It’s the most obvious thing, until life gets complicated.

1 John introduces two images, two archetypes, calling us back to the basics of our faith. The two images are: light & love. John opens by saying, “This is the message we have heard... that God is light and in him there is no darkness.” (1Jn 1:5). It’s a creation image. God is the source of all life and also the source of our flourishing. Later, John introduces the second image by saying, “this is the message you have heard... that we should love one another,” (1 John 3:11). Light & love are the touchstones of our faith. They’re simple, basic, direct. But we can spend a lifetime exploring their depths.

Today John invites us deeper into the meaning of love. So today, let’s hear John’s message in the context of your rector’s upcoming sabbatical. In two weeks I’ll be leaving on sabbatical, leaving in the middle of May and coming back in the middle of August. We’ve been together now as clergy & congregation for 7 1/2 years. We know each other pretty well. And we can be sure this upcoming season is going to create some complexity & uncertainty.

There are going to be questions, frustrations, uncertainties, and messes.

That's part of the experience, especially for a congregation our size. In the coming months if our main goal is a top-notch organization where everything happens with military precision, we're going to be deeply disappointed. But if our main goal is experiencing the life of God in worship & relationships; well, this is could be our best time of the year. Because during my sabbatical every question, every frustration, every uncertainty or mess is an invitation to know & experience the God of love in our midst. These are the seasons when our faith matters, or it means nothing.

John puts it like this: *if we don't love a brother or sister whom we can see then we cannot love God whom we cannot see.* Make that your mantra in the coming months. Because here's what God promises. God promises that when we devote ourselves to a rugged, sacrificial, commitment to each other, then the God of light & love will abide in us and dwell in our midst. The God of light & love will μὲνω. Not only that, the God of light & love will use us to create new life in the world.

In our Reading from Acts, Philip is on the move because of violence & threats. He lives in a complicated world. The church has been scattered because one of his fellow deacons, Stephen, was murdered under the approval of Saul (soon to be Paul). In that broken place of complexity & suffering, Philip responds to a simple invitation to get up & go. So he does. And when he responds to that simple invitation he discovers an opportunity to create life with a member of the Ethiopian

royal court. He comes alongside a stranger to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

And the God of light & love uses Philip to create new life in the world. The Ethiopian's baptism is a sign of that new creation breaking into the world through the love of someone following Jesus in the midst of suffering. By the end of the passage it's not just a one-off event but it's become a way of life as Philip proclaimed good news to all the towns he passed through (Acts 8.40).

During these coming months we're going to learn about our church. There are going to be frustrations & uncertainties. But at the end of this sabbatical season, if our main takeaway is a list of frustrations or uncertainties, then we're missing the point. Our church will survive. And before we spend time responding to any list of frustrations we'll do this. We'll share what we've learned about God's love. I'll ask you to tell me how God's light & God's love have abided here at St. C's in the midst of frustrations or uncertainties. Because until we've paid attention to God's abiding presence we won't have any idea how to respond to our institution as followers of Jesus.

In the coming months when you're looking for the God who is love to abide in our midst, remember these three things from 1 John. Remember this:

First. God's love was revealed when Jesus was sent. John writes that, "God's love was revealed [when]: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him." (1 John 4:9). Just like Philip in the book of Acts, God himself responds to an invitation to be sent into the world; to abide with us and to

proclaim good news. In the coming months, where are we invited to get up and go so that we can abide with others & proclaim God's love?

Second. God's love brings healing. John writes, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10). Atoning means reconciling & healing. God's love reconciles any brokenness between God & creation. That's the love we're called to embody. In the coming months, where are we invited to be healing agents of God's love in the midst of uncertainty or frustration?

Third. Our love is the evidence of our faith. John writes, "No one has ever seen God; [but] if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." (1 John 4:12). It's an astounding claim. "God's love that was manifest in the sending of the Son is [perfected] wherever believers love one another."² Our love is the evidence of our faith.

A closing word on that article about face-to-face meetings in the *Wash Post*. I love video phone calls. I was out of town last week at a Clergy Conference and video calls were a God-send. They're a beautiful way to connect when you're on the road. Penny responded so well that one morning she even offered me some of the cheerios stuck to her hand. It was incredibly meaningful.

So maybe the *Post* overstates some limits of video calls. Maybe we could say video calls sustain relationships for a short time. And maybe we could say the

² *New Interpreter's Bible: One Volume Commentary*, p. 910.

same thing for our faith. Maybe we could say just knowing about the God of our faith is a beautiful thing. Maybe we could say just seeing God in Scripture sustains us for a time.

But it would never sustain us for the rest of our lives. If we're going to have a living relationship — with God or our family— we need to abide with God and one other. [μενω] “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” (John 15:4). It's so obvious. It makes perfect sense when we hear it, but it's so easy to overlook.

Over these next few months, abide in God. Because whatever we learn about our church in the coming months won't matter if we're not abiding in God. To use John's language, our learning is fruitless if we aren't abiding in God because abiding in God is what allows us to love one another. “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them,” (1Jn 4:16). And here's what God promises. God promises that whenever we abide with one another in a rugged, sacrificial, commitment, then the God of light & love will abide with us and use us to bring healing & life to the world. *Amen.*