

Last week I introduced what we call the Letter —or, Sermon— of 1 John. It dates 70-80 yrs. after the Resurrection, long enough for early Christians to live with some hard questions; like what does the Resurrection mean in a world that still looks & feels very much the same; with great beauty and great suffering? We discussed John's use of archetypes, those simple themes & images with multiple levels of meaning, calling us back to the foundations of our faith. John revels in archetypes of light & life & love. I even introduced one of the words that unites the letters & Gospel of John; the word μένω, which means to stay, to remain, to abide.

Last week I suggested that John's archetypes — simple themes & images— might also be good for us as we approach an upcoming sabbatical season. After next Sunday, we'll be apart as clergy & congregation for 3 months. There will be uncertainty. There will be frustration. So let's remember, sabbatical isn't simply about clergy "getting away." It also isn't simply about congregations listing frustrations. It's a time for all of us to pay attention to God's abiding presence in new ways. How is the God of love abiding with us (μένω)? How are we abiding with God & one another (μένω)? During sabbatical every uncertainty and frustration is an invitation to know God's abiding love in our midst (μένω).

That was last week. Today in 1 John we continue exploring archetypes of our faith, and we hear this: *whatever is born of God conquers the world* (1Jn. 5.4). Today we encounter an archetype of birth. Today we're invited to consider how our birth as God's children allows us to conquer the world. And since John's using

archetypes —simple themes with different levels of meanings— we need to unpack what he means by “born of God” and “conquer the world.”

John begins by saying *everyone who believes that Jesus is [Messiah] has been born of God*. He says our birth begins with belief. And one of the key ideas in that archetype is family resemblance. To be *born* of God is to *resemble* God. For Christians who believe in the Incarnation, being born of God means resembling Jesus. We're born of God when we bear an unmistakable resemblance with the invisible God of our faith by following Jesus who's the visible presence of God. That's how we understand birth.

To understand conquering the world we need to do more unpacking. Because in-between our birth and our conquering, John introduces a word we don't expect. He introduces the word commandment. And he uses it a lot. He says, *we know we love God's children when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments* (1Jn. 5.2-3). Jesus uses that language even more. He says: *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another*, (Jn 15:10,12,17)

That's a lot of commanding, right? Especially in a conversation about love. It's tricky. For us, love has more to do with freedom. Commands have more to do with control. They don't necessarily fit together. But for John, love is defined by

commands. Because, he says, God's commands are born of God. They resemble God. That's why God's commands aren't burdensome. Because even God's commands resemble the God of love.

By now maybe you've realized that John thinks in circles. The whole passage begins with a question about abiding in God's love. If we're going to abide in God's love we need to be born of God. If we're going to be born of God we need to believe and obey. Obeying isn't burdensome because God's commands are also born of God. Got it? Whether John's circular thinking makes sense for you, or not, the connection between being born of God and conquering the world is fundamental. So let's tackle the big question: what on earth—and I do mean on earth—does John mean by “conquering the world”?

Let's do this. Let's break John's circle and define “conquering” by using a line instead. We tend to be linear people. And we have some sharp lines in our culture that highlight sharp conflicts. In addition to familiar lines separating politics on the left & right, we have sharp lines of division on issues of immigration, abuse, and violence. Whatever else John means by “conquering the world” it must be relevant for the conflicts of our world. Our faith must have something to say in the midst of conflict & suffering.

So let's unpack John's theme of conquering by considering two cultural movements; 2 movements that reveal the difference between *conquering* the world and being conquered *by* the world. Two movements. One is a global phenomenon.

The other is less well-known. One is about violence & trauma. The other is about isolation & despair. But they both reveal the kind of division that our faith allows us—and commands us— us to conquer.

The first movement is the #MeToo movement. #MeToo is about exploitation & coercion. Whatever your politics, followers of Jesus are bound by our baptismal covenant to protect the dignity of every human being. This summer our Presiding Bishop is leading a pastoral response to #MeToo at the triennial Convention of the national Episcopal Church.¹ Because #MeToo has put a floodlight on one of our culture's failures to resemble the God of abiding love.

#MeToo is a rebuke of what John describes earlier in the letter, as a temptation to love things of the world; what he describes as, “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life,” (1 Jn 2:16). If we we're born of God, we're commanded to resemble & embody the God of abiding love. #MeToo reveals how tragically we fail to resemble God.

The second movement is still relatively unknown but rapidly growing. It's the booming industry of professional cuddlers. Did you know? There's an increasing number of trained professionals who get paid to embrace clients and to hold them for one-hour sessions in a purely non-sexual way. It's “cuddling for hire.”² According to a national article, "While paying for touch may sound

¹ <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2018/05/04/house-of-bishops-invites-reflections-on-metoo-and-the-episcopal-church/>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2018/04/20/some-people-are-paying-for-cuddles-and-its-not-what-you-might-think/>

awkward or unnatural to those who get plenty of it from partners or other close connections, for some people it is an antidote to a culture where casual physical contact [is] elusive. The percentage of U.S. adults living without a spouse or partner [is now] 42 percent... and the rise in on-screen interactions [which we talked about last week] means more socializing takes place without even the possibility of touch.”³

Human touch is fundamental to our flourishing. It's linked with an array of health benefits, and the absence of touch is associated with everything from diabetes to early death. “Yet the United States is among the world's most touch-averse cultures.”⁴ Cigna, the global health company, recently partnered in a survey of 20,000 U.S. adults and concluded that loneliness has reached “epidemic levels”⁵ in our country. This epidemic of loneliness represents another one of our culture's failures to resemble the God of abiding love.

We live in a world that's often trapped between exploitation and alienation, between fear and isolation, between #MeToo and cuddlers for hire. In a world desperate for safety (from exploitation) and meaningful connection (with other humans) the commandments of our faith are profoundly good news.

At the very moment #MeToo is generating a mass movement based on speaking out; we also need to be speaking out with the language of our faith. Our

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/many-americans-are-lonely-and-gen-z-most-of-all-study-finds/>

confessional language is more vital than ever. It's the language we find on the lips of Jesus today in the Gospel. Today as Jesus shares a meal with friends on the night before his crucifixion, he says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

In a world of exploitation we're commanded to speak the unmistakable language of love. Not a parody of love defined by our desires, wishes or feelings. That's how people justify exploitation; with urges & feelings. Let's not leave anyone guessing about our motivation. The only way people are going to know what we mean by love is if we speak the language of our faith. For Christians love means laying down our lives for one another (Jn. 15:12–13). We need to say that. And we also need to act. Because our faith conquers the world when we confess Jesus as Lord and sacrificially love.

In a world desperate for meaningful connection, we're commanded to be a community of healing; a community where people are integrated and made whole. Not by offering a contingent or contractual embrace as long as they pull their weight and help with Coffee Hour. That would just be another form of alienation based on performance. People are only going to know they belong if we speak up and then remove the barriers preventing our embrace.

Today in Acts Peter is confronted with the living presence of God's Spirit in a group of (otherwise) unclean & undeserving foreigners. And his response is an embrace. He has no other choice. He says, "Can anyone withhold water for

baptizing these people who've received the Holy Spirit just like us?" (Acts 10:47).

Can anyone withhold God's embrace? That's the question. Our faith conquers the world when we confess Jesus as Lord and love one another by removing barriers that prevent God's embrace.

We conquer the world with a victory of divine love. That's how we defeat exploitation, alienation, or any other dehumanizing forces. We're commanded to love. "And [God's] commandments are not burdensome," because they're also the key to our joy. Jesus says, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

This is how God has made known his victory. This is how God has revealed his vindication in the sight of all nations. This is how God has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness. This is how all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God (Psa. 98) — God's victory is proclaimed & known when we confess Jesus & obey God's command to love. This is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. *Amen.*