

What For?

Text: 1 John 4:16-21

Hymn: "Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart" (LSB 708)

The First Letter of John can be a strange experience for Christians to read. It has some beautiful, famous passages. Nearly right off the bat, we hear,

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1:8-9).

When you feel your sin, take comfort: the Scripture says this is true about you, but your hope is not in being sinless but in God, who is faithful and just to forgive you. A little later it says that "Jesus Christ the righteous...is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (2:1-2).

But then John goes on to say things like "Everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning" and if we don't love one another, we're of the devil. John starts out with this beautiful Gospel comfort but ends with warnings about not loving enough. Exactly opposite how we Lutheran pastors were trained to write sermons: Start off by showing the people what sinners they are and then finish with, "It's okay. Jesus died for you." Clearly, the Apostle John did not pass preaching class in seminary.

How do these things fit together? As it happens, we have both of these dimensions in our passage today from 1 John 4. It begins with "So we know..." What comes before to explain the "so"? "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." How do we know that God and His love abide in us? The answer is not in what you find in you but in what God has given you. As we heard Jesus say last week, we are born from above, born again of water and the Spirit.

To the world we're like the wind—you hear its sound but don't know where it comes from or where it's going. The world looks at us and sees ordinary human beings; they don't know where we come from or where we're going, because we're born of the Spirit.

And the giving of the Spirit is not something you discover by examining yourself but by examining the promises of God. "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit" (v 13). And what has He given of his Spirit? The gifts of the Spirit, the first of which is the knowledge of His Son Jesus Christ. As we know from Jesus' words in John 17, the Spirit was given so we might know Jesus and be drawn to Him and comforted by Him. As it says just before our text, "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God." And this is now our confidence. What Jesus has done and who Jesus is is the foundation on which everything else is built. That is the cause and the ground of our salvation and the salvation of the world. Without it we have nothing. It doesn't matter how nice and pleasant we are, how much less bad we are than our neighbors, except for what Jesus has done for us we have no standing before God.

But now comes the green season, and the church's focus shifts from what God has done to save us and make us His to our new life as God's baptized children. Several months ago I came across one of these remarkable nature clips. Two canoeists out on some river catch sight of a couple of eagles stranded in the middle of the water. However they got there, they were now sitting, entangled in each other, waiting to drown. And these Good Samaritan kayakers manage to get the eagles out of the water and on to dry land. They saved them. And you could ask, "What were they saved *from*?" Answer; "From death, from death by drowning." They were saved from

the river that was a threat to their very existence. But you could also ask, “What were they saved *for*?” They weren’t just saved from drowning. They were saved for carrying on life. They got onto dry ground, looking pathetic and bedraggled. But they shook out their wings and took flight again. The salvation *from* the water was so they could be saved *for* the air—*from* drowning, *for* flying.

In the same way, our salvation is not just salvation from sin, from death, from condemnation and judgment, from hell, from punishment. In fact, if you focus only on what would have happened if you had been left in your sins, you create a real problem. Salvation in that case really becomes the stereotypical pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die. I was going to go to hell. Now I will go to heaven. In the meantime, I’ll just twiddle my thumbs and pass the time until it happens (or worse, I’ll do with my life whatever I want, since it doesn’t really matter). There’s a reason every third grader asks, “If God wants me to go to heaven, why doesn’t He just kill me as soon as I’m saved?” If being saved from hell were the whole content of our salvation, that would be a fair question.

But we are never just saved *from* something; we are at the same time saved *for* something. It’s not just that a future heavenly kingdom awaits but that we are already in the kingdom now! This is what John is writing about when he writes his letter. We have been saved from sin. Jesus Christ is the propitiation for our sins. He has reconciled us to God. He has taken away our guilt. But He has saved us not only from the punishment of sin but from the power of sin that we may now live in righteousness. God loved us first. And if He didn’t love us first, we might as well go home now and do whatever it is that keeps us occupied until we die. But He loved us first and because God loved us *we also now love*. God brought us into His kingdom of love to live in love!

And we have come to know the love of God because we have come to know Jesus. You look at all that Jesus has done, all that Jesus has said, all you see is love, endless charity. God is love. And so it naturally follows that “whoever abides in love abides in God and God abides in him.” One of the great implications of this new life of life John spells out for us: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” Anybody here have any fears? In that case, you haven’t been perfected in love yet. What’s the solution? If you want to be perfected in love more than you already are, and you ought to (since you’re not perfected in love yet), you need to seek where God is working to perfect your love.

St. Augustine, when writing about this passage, compared the two kinds of fear in the Bible—the one here and the “beginning of wisdom” kind—to two kinds of wives, an unfaithful one and a faithful one. Both fear their husbands. One fears the husband lest he come home and she get caught. The other fears that unless he continues to love her, she will lose him. They both fear, one out of guilt, the other out of love. He goes on to say that we are to be like that wife whose one concern is that she never lose her wonderful husband. That is the kind of fear we ought to have for God, which is in fact an expression of love. But we need not fear God and His judgment, because the judgment against our sin has already been carried by and in Jesus Christ.

And so through the knowledge of God’s love we learn to be less fearful of other things. The world, after all, is a fearful place. We fear other people. We fear nature. And if we really knew what was going on, we would live in fear of the spirits. Several years ago, a Western documentary maker went to East Africa to document the destruction of indigenous cultures by Christian missionaries. The project quickly

became very difficult. She'd ask people, "What's changed in your life since you became Christian?" And women would tell her, "My husband no longer beats me." That didn't exactly fit the narrative. The other message that kept coming through again and again was "I no longer have to live in fear." You go to people who don't know the God of the Bible and they live in fear of spirits and gods and all the other things that threaten us.

But when God loves us and we receive the love of God and He gives us of His Spirit, when we come to know the Maker of heaven and earth as our Father who has nothing but goodwill toward us, we can say with St. Paul, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will he not also with him give us all those other things that we are fearful about? And we begin to see in every neighbor not a threat, not a drain on my resources or time but an opportunity to join God in doing good and displaying His love in the world.

The First Letter of John may seem strange to us. It shouldn't. "We must love our brother," it says. We must love our fellow believer. And we *must*, because if we don't, we deny the love of God. But we are not saved by our love. We are saved by Him who loved us and gave Himself up for us to make us a new creature in His own image. And He who began a good work in you will continue to work in you to perfect you in love through faith in Him. Do you want that love to be perfected in you? Attend to the loving voice of your heavenly Father. Receive Christ's body and blood for the strengthening of your faith. Hear the loving discipline when your Father calls you to repentance. Heed His call wherever He leads you and guides you. And you may have confidence for the day of judgment because He loved you first.

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