

I JOHN: A LETTER TO STRUGGLING CHURCHES

1: The Word of Life

I John 1:1-10

PENTECOST 12

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Today, we begin the last suggested group of summer readings from the Narrative Lectionary — the First Epistle, or Letter of John. First John is not like the Epistle to the Galatians, where Paul tells them in no uncertain terms how they have provoked his anger. It is not like the First Letter to the Corinthians, where Paul addresses explicit questions and problems in the Corinthian congregation. In fact, John does not give us a clear picture of the problems he is facing, and he doesn't even tell us who his intended audience is. For this reason, scholars have long classified John's three short letters among the "catholic" or "universal" epistles.

The author of today's reading was probably John, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, also known as "*the disciple whom Jesus loved.*" John and his older brother, James, sons of a man named Zebedee, were Jews from Galilee, brought up to follow their father's trade as fishermen.

James and John were among the first disciples called by Jesus, who surnamed the brothers '*Boanerges*' or "*the sons of thunder,*" reflecting the intensity of their personalities.

The two brothers, along with Simon Peter, formed Jesus' inner circle of disciples, and remained with Jesus to the end.

Both were numbered among the Apostles of the infant Church.

James was the first of the Apostles to be martyred.

He was put to death by the order of Herod around the year 44 A.D.

Because John also wrote the Gospel bearing his name, he is sometimes called John the Evangelist.

In his letters, he also uses the titles of “the elder” and “the presbyter.” As in his Gospel, so in his Epistles, John seems reticent to mention his own name.

His use of terms such as “beloved” and “my little children” indicate that he was well known to his readers and did not need to mention his own name.

He does make it clear that he was an Apostle and eyewitness to **“that which was from the beginning” (1:1)**, distinguishing sharply between ‘we’ (the Apostles), ‘you’ (the readers) and ‘they’ (the false teachers).

The style, vocabulary, and emphasis of this Epistle and the Gospel of John, or the Fourth Gospel, are so similar that most scholars agree that one person was the author of both works.

Both use similar and simple vocabulary to communicate profound truths.

Both frequently deal in contrasts.

In his First Epistle, John distinguishes between light and darkness (1:5), loving God and loving the world (2:15-17), truth and falsehood (2:20-21), eternal life and eternal death (3:14).

The ancient Church universally attributed this Epistle to John.

Polycarp, a Christian leader in Asia Minor, and who died as a martyr (155 A.D.), was a disciple of John and cited this Epistle in his own writings.

So did Irenaeus, a disciple, himself, of Polycarp, and considered the Church’s first great theologian.

Early Christian writers tell us that in his later years, John lived in the city of Ephesus on the coast of Asia Minor, known today as Western Turkey, where Paul also lived and taught for at least three years.

Held to be the youngest of the Apostles, John outlived the others and lived to a great old age, dying peacefully, according to Polycarp, at Ephesus during the reign of the Roman Emperor, Trajan.

Generally speaking, the New Testament Epistles were written in response to certain situations and problems that were brought to the attention of the Apostles, like Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians.

Some were written to offer comfort to Christians suffering trials, facing hardships and enduring persecution, like Peter’s Epistles.

Some were written to confront wrongdoing in the Church, and to call erring believers to repentance.

And others were written because false teachers had appeared in the Church and threatened to lead Christians away from the foundation of true faith and practice, as set forth by Christ and His Apostles.

Such was John's First Epistle.

John does not mince words:

“Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?

This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son” (2:22).

Two chapters later, John warns against naively embracing false teachers and their doctrines:

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God . . .” (4:1).

This morning, I begin this four-part sermon series with the first of John's responses to what was causing confusion in the churches of his time, and to what was drawing them away from their faith foundations and the Church itself.

Since the foundation of our own Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 1988, our churches have experienced a dramatic decline in membership, attendance, and giving.

We are not alone, for most mainline and many evangelical churches are suffering these losses.

Buzz words like “the Nones,” “spiritual but not religious,” “the sexual revolution,” “the need to keep children and the youth,” and “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” have been used to explain why today's churches are struggling.

Each of these terms could form the basis of a sermon series or an adult forum topic.

The “Nones,” of course, refer to those who, when surveyed for their religious affiliation, prefer to check the box marked ‘none,’ meaning no religion at all.

“Spiritual but not religious” characterizes those who desire little or no contact with organized religion, per se.

“The sexual revolution” has left a legacy of confusion and destruction in our society, with an increase in struggling, single-parent families, and a decrease in marriages in general.

“The need to keep children and youth” is readily obvious and observant, especially on Sunday mornings.

The faith is not being passed on.

And “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” is a term that describes the world view of many young adults, who, if they believe in a God, want a God who wants them to be good people and not jerks, who should help them feel good about themselves, and who does not really do anything to them.

We live in a transitional age as we experience the shifting cultural and political frameworks upon which our Western Civilization has been built.

This shift can best be summarized by a question that was posed by the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, who asks:

“Why was it virtually impossible NOT to believe in God in, say, 1500, in our Western society, while, in 2000, many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”

Taylor’s question points to a huge shift in our world.

We now live in a time when the experience of God is contested, and to many, (even those who still believe), doubtful.

We are deeply and rightly concerned about the loss of church members, especially the loss of young people, and the vitality of our institutions — big concerns, no doubt.

These concerns really can’t be addressed until we recognize two unpleasant realities:

We live in a new and emerging time and
We can’t go back to the way things were.

In today’s reading, John writes to churches that were also in crisis and struggling. He speaks of some who are **“walking in darkness,”** hostile to their Christian brothers and sisters.

Worse, he goes on to say that some have turned to the devil and have foresworn their righteous practices, while others deny Jesus as the Messiah and listen to false prophets who mislead the Church.

How does John deal with these divisions, conflicts and threats?

In the opening verses, he emphasizes the fellowship that believers have with one another and with the Apostles.

This message is that readers should walk in light, rather than darkness.

Walking in light means walking in love.

In short, he exhorts his audience to love and unity.

Yet, this is not where he begins.

He begins by pointing back to the fundamental evangelical announcement —

God the Word, the Life, has come near.

When he sees the churches falling apart, John addresses the problem by first talking about the incarnation — **in Jesus, God the Word, came to life in Him.**

The text before us this morning gives the impression of breathless starts and stops.

These are the words of a person in possession of some towering cosmic truth, who cannot wait to get it out, but is too excited to finish a sentence before moving on to the next thought.

John not only begins with theology, but with controversial theology.

One of the debates wracking the Church in John's age concerns the incarnation of The Word.

As before in his Gospel, John begins by declaring that The Word has become visible, audible, tangible, and touchable.

Instead of trying to find some common ground, a milk toast confession that would be satisfying to the trouble makers of the Church, John immediately gives a divisive confession of faith in Jesus, **The Word of Life.**

John offers readers a confession about Jesus, a confession of realities that are essential to the unity and health of the new humanity known as the Church.

First, it is a confession about beginnings.

The specific beginning he announces is the beginning that occurred when the **Word of Life** appeared.

By alluding to the "beginning" of Genesis 1, he wants to emphasize that the incarnation of **The Word** is the beginning of a new beginning.

It's the beginning of a new creation story.

"Incarnation" here does not simply refer to the fact that the eternal Word became flesh and blood, but to the entire life and ministry of Jesus, which he, himself, witnessed.

This encompasses both Jesus the person and His work.

The appearance of **The Word** in touchable human flesh, His life ministry within Israel, His death on a cross, and His resurrection, all of this constitutes the new beginning of the world.

Second, it is a confession about the source of life.

Jesus is described here as “*The Word of Life*” and as “*eternal life*” (vv. 1-2).

He does not simply HAVE life.

He IS life, and He has life because the Father has given Him to have life in Himself, to have the life of the Spirit in full measure (John 5:26).

We might be misled by centuries of Christian pietism to think that the life John announces is an internal spiritual reality, or a disembodied life in heaven.

John’s reference to “*what we have touched with our hands*” (v. 1) refers specifically to the disciples’ touching of Jesus after His resurrection.

Jesus is the *Word of Life, the eternal life*, supremely in His resurrection from the dead.

Life is available to us through the *Word of Life*.

Third, it is a confession of witness.

We cannot see Jesus anymore.

We cannot even hear the voices of the Apostles.

But John has committed his witness of Jesus and his message to writing.

Like Thomas, we want to see it for ourselves, to touch the wounds and to look Jesus in the eye.

This demand, of course, is foolish for us.

Much of what we know about anything is based on testimony.

Do you know if China exists?

Have you seen it?

Did Rome conquer the Mediterranean World?

Did George Washington win the American Revolution?

Have you touched an atom or an electron?

We rely on testimony every day.

The disciples testified that they saw, knew, heard, lived with, and touched Jesus.

In other words, beloved people of God,
they had fellowship with Jesus.

This intimacy is what John is getting at when he talks about the communion of the Church with the Apostles, the Father, and Jesus.

There is a necessary order here.

We have no communion with the Father

without communion with the Son;

no communion with the Son

without communion with the Apostles;

and no communion with the Apostles

without receiving their written testimony in the communion of the Church.

To paraphrase Paul, life comes from communion, and communion comes from hearing, especially hearing from the *Word of Life*.

John writes to a divided and struggling Church, a Church in crisis.

How is such a Church to be unified?

Not by common ideas or policies or causes, but by a Person — the Person of the **Eternal Life** manifested from the Father.

The Church is unified only by miraculous reality, which it proclaims in a radically divisive confession, the confession that life is available **ONLY** through the **Eternal Life** that was with God from the beginning, the **Eternal Life** that has come near as Jesus, to be heard seen, gazed upon, and handled by the Apostles.

The Church is unified by a radical adherence to the witness of the Apostles, like John, who committed it to writing in the New Testament for us and for our salvation.

AMEN