

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### 1 John 5:1-12

### *"Believe God"*

John has been circling repeatedly over his three "tests" of true Christianity, seeking to reassure his readers that they hold the true faith. By now you know them: believe that Jesus is the Son of God, Savior and Messiah come in the flesh; embrace his atoning death and his advocacy with the Father, repent of sin, and seek to live a moral life in obedience to his commandments; and thirdly learn from his love for you to love others. Belief, obedience and love are John's themes, and in this passage he weaves them all together as he moves to the conclusion of his letter. The themes are familiar, and the emphasis of this passage lies in four words that he uses here repeatedly: testimony, faith, life and overcoming.

#### 1) *The Testimony of God*

John several times mentions the "testimony" of God to who Jesus is, and lists three "witnesses," although they are a little obscure. Two of them he links together emphatically: Jesus is the one who "came by water and blood." There have been many attempts to decide what these refer to: the most widely accepted is that the water means Jesus' baptism, and the blood his crucifixion. (Other attempts to make them into a Christian's participation in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper

seem anachronistic – neither of these were regarded as "sacraments" in the 1<sup>st</sup> C.)

Why emphasize Jesus' baptism and crucifixion as witnesses to who he was? The Gospels agree that Jesus' public ministry began with his baptism in the Jordan River at the hands of John the Baptist, and all agree that at that moment "heaven opened" and the voice of God said "this is my Son whom I love, and with him I am well pleased" (Mt 3:16-17). At that moment also the Spirit of God "descended upon him." Jesus was "ratified" by his Father; or in John's language, here the Father "testified about his Son."

Now some of John's opponents, whom he calls "false prophets," claimed that at his baptism Jesus "became the Christ," but that this title and power were removed from him before his crucifixion. They taught that a divine being could not die, so the person who hung on the cross was only "the man Jesus" and not the Christ of God. For this reason, most interpreters believe, John emphasizes that Jesus came "not by the water only, but by the water and the blood" – meaning that the Son of God was the one who died. So both Jesus' life and death testified to who he was.

The third “testimony,” says John, is given by “the Spirit,” who “is the truth;” he tells the truth about Jesus. This is what Reformers like Luther and Calvin called “the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit;” the inner conviction that Christians have that they can indeed believe that Jesus was the Son of God in human form. So John is pointing to historical evidence about Jesus from his baptism and crucifixion, and subjective internal evidence that the Holy Spirit provides. These are the witnesses to Jesus that God has provided, and John says Christians are called to accept and believe them.

## 2) *Faith and Life*

The result of this acceptance is what John calls “faith.” It involves a knowing embrace of the teachings about Jesus found in the Gospels, a willing embrace of a life of repentance, discipleship and love, and a personal knowledge of Jesus mediated by the Holy Spirit within the believer.

There are many definitions of “faith” that emphasize different aspects of the believer’s relationship with God. One that Jesus used and John repeats often is that it is like being “born of God,” “born again,” “born anew,” “born from above.” The emphasis is on the new start that comes from believing, and which is likened to becoming a part of God’s family, a “child of God.” In slightly different language, it means receiving God’s gift of “new life;” of sharing in the very life of God that was in Jesus. Because it is “the life of God,” it is by its very nature unending – thus “eternal life” – but it is entered into now. “This is eternal life,” said Jesus, “that they know you, the only true God.”

John emphasizes that this life is “in the Son” – that to “have the Son” means “to have life.” To have faith that Jesus was the Son of God who came to earth to die for the sins of his

people, and who now stands at the Father’s right hand as their advocate, is for John to “have the Son” and to “have eternal life.”

Faith in Jesus means therefore to put our confident trust in God that he has indeed redeemed us, that we are now reconciled to him, that he loves us as a Father loves his children, and that by the Spirit he gives us a “new life” in which we increasingly seek to obey his commands and to love one another. If you prefer a more “cognitive” description of faith, I have always liked E. J. Carnell’s definition of faith as “resting the mind in the sufficiency of the evidence.” It means accepting at a deep level the testimony that God has given us about his Son, and living with the consequences of that acceptance.

## 3) *Overcoming The World*

So God’s testimony leads to our faith and to new life. But John has one more thread to tie to this: a consequence that I think means a lot to us today. It is those who have faith, says John, who can “overcome the world.”

What does that mean? In the NT “the world,” as you know, usually means all those forces opposed to the reign of God. It is the total of sin and evil and rebellion that characterizes a fallen world. It is anti-God, and it inflicts itself upon the life of the believer. For John’s Christian readers, it would have meant especially the pagan influences that surrounded them in 1<sup>st</sup> C. Greco-Roman culture. The culture offered temptations to disobey God’s commands; threatened persecution to those who would not conform to actions like Emperor-worship; and tried to lead Christians astray by false teachings.

John is sure that the presence of the Holy Spirit within believers makes it possible for them to overcome this kind of opposition. God’s Spirit is greater than any perverse

forces in the world, so Christians do not need to be subject to them. They should remember that Jesus has already won a great victory over these “powers of darkness,” and so believers who share his life can also live victoriously.

The question for you and me is, how does “the world” threaten Christians today? Can we who have faith overcome it? Christians in different cultures of course experience “the world” in very different ways – some of them through legal prohibition, major societal discrimination, and threats or the reality of violence. What about our culture? How does it impact Christian belief and practice?

If you asked twenty people here today about the biggest obstacles they face, what would you expect to hear? What I hear over and over is that people are exhausted, that they are running faster and faster to keep up with the basic demands of life. Whether that’s because of family; the cost of housing on Long Island, high fuel costs, rising interest rates, property taxes, medical bills, mean that everyone in the family has to work long hours just to make ends meet. If you are retired and living on a fixed income, it’s even worse. So most mothers of school-age children must work, and families are fragmented by the “24/7” schedule of many workplaces. Anyone may now be working evenings, nights, or weekends - which does nothing for family life or church life.

Sunday is now the busiest shopping day of the week, and the only day some families have to spend even a few hours together. Sports have now intruded into it in a major way; one more day in the endless “taxi service” that is suburban family life. Church attendance, in many parts of the country, is now declining because it’s in losing competition with “family time.”

So adults are “strung out” and have little time or energy left for their spouses or their children. Marriages are under stress, but the main victims are children. In the wake of another tragic death in our school district, I have had conversations in the past week with parents, teachers, a counselor and a therapist. What I hear is that teenagers feel left out, unwanted, unloved, unvalued by their frantic parents. Couple that to the “separation issues” that teens have with their parents, and you have a recipe for isolation, depression, or destructive behavior among middle and high school students.

Compounding the problem are the pressures that parents communicate to their children, sometimes in very subtle ways. “Live in a good school district, get good grades, get into a good college, get more good grades, get a good job...then you can repeat the cycle.” We may not say those things aloud, but our children perceive that the pressure is on them to “succeed.” If that means playing three-season sports, being in the band or orchestra, working on the newspaper – all for your resumé; and oh, don’t forget about getting a job after school to help pay your way! – then kids feel pressured to do what they have to so that they “succeed”! And when we load our young people up with more material “stuff” than most people in the world could imagine, we only reinforce the idea that for people to “succeed,” they need these things. What we fail to grasp is the high price that kids pay when they see themselves as “failures to succeed”.

Our definition of “the good life” has become a major way “the world” shapes our lives, and not always for the better! What, as Christians, are we to do about it? We are told that with the resources of faith we can “overcome the world.” How? By setting priorities that reflect what we hold dear. If we believe family time is of prime importance, then we have to make space for

it in our family schedules. That certainly means *not* doing some things we are doing now! If we believe that being part of the family of the church is vital to developing balanced young people, then we have to make time for it.

If we believe that love is the one thing that everyone needs, we have to find the time and the courage to show love to our children, to our grandchildren, and to all the other children we are in any way responsible for. Teenagers and young adults act as though they don't want our love, but they do. We have to find the courage of our convictions, of our faith, to speak to our children about their concerns, their interests, their goals, their fears – to let them know that we care, even while they are “pushing us away.”

Our faith is a gift that can enable us to overcome the world as it most impacts us right now. We need the strength that comes from knowing that God loves us and is with us; we need the perspective that comes from knowing that relationship to God is vitally important; we need the hope that comes from knowing that God loves our children as much as he loves us; we need the trust that says God and his people will never forsake us in times of trouble.

Faith can give us the priorities, the hope, the confidence, the endurance, the love, the strength to “overcome” the threats that the world presents to our lives, to our well-being, to our families, to our churches, to our communities. You have heard it over and over, as I have: “I don't know how people without faith get through life at all.”

You and I have been blessed to be given God's gifts of testimony, faith, life, and the ability to overcome. Let us use God's gift of faith to overcome the things that are at war with God, and with goodness, and with human flourishing.

Let us pray...