

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann at the First Congregational Church, UCC, on May 13, 2012, the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Mother's Day.

“Love wins!?”

***Psalm 98; Acts 10:44-48; I John 5:1-6;
John 15:9-17***

This short letter of I John from which we read is addressed to the little church in the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire, like every superpower including our own, was comprehensive, endlessly demanding, and impatient with anyone who did not sign on with loyalty and conviction.

In the midst of that totalizing power of the empire is this little company of people who have signed on for another way in the world with Jesus. Consequently, their life and their faith contradicted the claims of empire. Their life and faith, precisely because of the force of the empire, was always fragile and in jeopardy. Thus, the letter written to the church is to remind and affirm to the church its special identity and its special purpose in the world.

We continue to read this ancient letter to the church because it is as contemporary for us as today. Now, like then, the church in our society is a fragile operation whose identity is in jeopardy and whose purpose is easy to forget as we are swallowed up by the empire. Thus the letter is to us, as it was to them. It offers to the church, now as then,

- a precious identity,
- a demanding summons,
- a radically different life, and
- an amazing promise.

I want to think with you about those four themes,

- precious identity,
- demanding summons;

- radically different life, and
- amazing promise.

I.

Our reading begins with a reminder of *identity and belonging*: Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God and everyone who loves the parent loves the child (5:1).

The opener likely refers to baptism for which the church uses all kinds of rich phrases, “bought with a price,” “sealed as Christ’s own forever,” “that I belong to my faithful savior.” Here, the writer says, “born of God,” claiming a pedigree that connects earthly folks to the heavenly parent, welcomed into the family of God. And because of the connection to the heavenly parent, the baptized know Jesus, son of God, as a brother, a partner, a companion for our life in the world.

The sum of these phrases is to say that folks alongside Jesus are different folks who belong to a different family, a different identity and a different loyalty. This is no generic religion. This is not faith that accommodates to every political claim, every economic possibility and every pressure from the empire. There is always an awareness and a resolve to live a life that is congruent with the peculiar family to which we belong.

II.

That precious identity is followed in the letter by a *demanding summons*:

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments (5:2-3).

Serious parents have demanding expectations of their children and do not cater to their whims. So this heavenly father, this glorious mother god has clear expectations of the children who belong to this family. U.S. religion, in a therapeutic mode, has made it easy to think that God’s love is causal and careless. Not! This God of the gospel is always recruiting folk to an alternative purpose in

the world. So Jesus, the Son, calls disciples, that is, people under discipline, pressed to reflective intentionality about life in the world. The substance of recruitment is terse: obey his commandments. This is not reference to the big catalogue of commandments that we have from Judaism, though there were Jewish Christians who took that entire inventory of commandments seriously.

Jesus is more terse in his summons to obey. It is simply, “follow me.” Imitate me. Sometimes he added to that, “Sell all you have and give it to the poor and follow me.” This summons to that young man was that he should give up the life of the Roman Empire (or any empire) that is committed to power, control, and wealth, and be present in the world differently. Notice that the summons to obey commandments is matched by “love God,” and you know how that goes:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
all your mind, all your soul, and all your substance.

The church in the U.S. has spent a lot of time and energy accommodating conventional consumerism (with its strong military component), so that we have become largely an echo of conventional society, both liberal and conservative. But here is a jolt of alert, that we have another life to live in the world.

III.

Then the summons is given specificity for the sake of *a radically different life*. The wonderment is how to love God, whom we cannot see. And, of course, the conclusion of the gospel is that we love God, whom we cannot see, by loving the neighbor, whom we can see. That is what Jesus did as and what we are to do. He was out in the neighborhood. And as he went along, he defined the neighborhood in radically inclusive ways: neighborliness is showing gracious hospitality, mercy, and justice toward those in need. So love God and love neighbor. This, in the empire, is no ordinary life!

The letter of John has a peculiar, distinctive notion of love that means giving one’s self away in deep engagement with others, especially the needy and the disabled. The tradition in which we stand in the United Church of Christ, moreover, insists and

assumes that this notion of love concerns not only spontaneous neighborly acts, but sustained, systemic efforts of program and policy that have restorative impact.

When they asked him if he was the Messiah, he gave them no metaphysical answer. But like any good teacher, he said, “What do you notice about me?” Do you notice that,

The blind see,
The lame walk,
The lepers are cleansed,
The deaf hear,
The dead are raised,
The poor have their debts cancelled.

Love of neighbor as the way of loving God means to expend transformative energy so that the neighborhood is transformed and enhanced in the interest of everyone in the neighborhood.

That is what the people of Jesus, the ones born of God, do. They are not preoccupied with their own status in this world or in the next, but get their minds off themselves for the sake of the neighborhood.

It is a big cause for alarm that in our self-enhancing culture the church echoes that self-concern about its resources while reneging on its missional mandate. But, of course, this congregation has always known better. It knows, as the writer says, that the command for love that gives self away is not burdensome:

His commandments are not burdensome. (5:4). This is the true joy of life; anyone who seriously invests in neighborliness as a way to love God will find joy that does not come from self-preoccupation.

IV.

Now you know all of this. What you may not know and what may surprise you is that the paragraph ends with an *amazing promise*:

This is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.
Who is it that conquers the world but the one who
believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (5:4-5).

The sentence repeats the initial identity “born of God.” But it then stretches out a future that belongs to such folk. I was struck by the fact that in this quick sentence the writer employs the word “conquer” three times:

Those born of God *conquer* the world;
This is the victory that *conquers* the world;
Jesus is the one who *conquers* the world.

The “world” here refers to the power arrangements of the Roman Empire. It refers to this managed world of power. It is the socio-economic, political system designed to enhance the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable. It is the system rooted *anxiety* that functions in *greed* that ends in *violence* that produces *poverty and alienation*. That arrangement goes on and on, to perpetuity. It will last and last and last, and nothing can be done about it, because it is so powerful and so comprehensive and so smart. That is the real world!

And then this evangelical gospel:
Those born of God *conquer* the world.
This is the victory that *conquers* the world.
Jesus is the one who *conquers* the world.

As Rob Bell says it: “Love wins!”

But not just any love: self-giving love that has transformational capacity. This rhetoric for the church sounds a little like the faithful chanting, “USA, USA.” Except it is now not force, and not worldly power and not money.

This is not coercion or force or intimidation rooted in normal systems of power. It is rather the transformative intention of God entrusted into our hands that brings the world into sync with the God who loves the world. We see this in Jesus, weak and vulnerable and foolish as he seemed to be. He had the touch! He had the word!

He has the resolve! And when people were with him, all things were made new.

We are free to imagine that the death systems of violence, the greed systems of poverty and the despairing system of exploitation have no staying power. They cannot be sustained in the face of self-giving, transformative love. They are “conquered!”

This little letter of John is an invitation to us to think, to reconsider, to recognize, and to affirm our peculiar status and role in the world. When it is faithful, the church is not impressed with the death systems of the world. Because we follow in the wake of the Friday guy who defeated the power of death. That is who we follow because we are disciples born of God. When we embrace that *identity*, that *summons*, that *vocation* and that *promise*, we are our way rejoicing. We know that his rule has no end. We live as those whom God has birthed to new life!

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