

WE WILL BE LIKE HIM

1 JOHN 3:1-7

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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I want to begin by passing along greetings from our sisters and brothers at Foothills Mennonite Church in Calgary. Our family had an enjoyable time visiting them last Sunday.

I also want to thank Ruth Bergen Braun for her sermon on the “as yourself” part of the great commandment to love God and to love our neighbours *as ourselves*. Ruth was absolutely right—we talk a lot about loving God and neighbour, but not nearly as much about what a healthy love of self looks like. I’m grateful that she was able to explore this important theme in last Sunday’s sermon.

Last Sunday in Calgary, I preached on “doubting Thomas”—the one who wouldn’t believe in the risen Christ unless he saw him with his own eyes. I talked about how the testimony of those first witnesses and the rise of the early church was one of the most powerful apologetics for the historicity of the resurrection.

A group of frightened disciples, crushed with the disappointment of the death of Jesus who they believed would be their Messiah were transformed into fearless witnesses for the risen Jesus, and martyrs who bled and died for their faith.

This phenomenon is very difficult to account for unless Jesus really *did* rise from the dead and really *did* appear to his disciples in bodily form. People don’t tend to be that committed to “spiritualized understandings of hope” or other such things.

But, it’s easy to idealize the early church and imagine that if we could just be more like them, everything would be wonderful.

The early church was still populated by fallen human beings. And it didn’t take long for people to begin to find the scandal of the cross and the physicality of the resurrection too unbelievable.

1 John is a tiny little book near the end of our bibles, and was a letter written to the church around the year 100 AD to deal with divisions in belief and practice that had arisen mere *decades* after the events that drove those first disciples out into the world with the good news of the risen Jesus.

Some in this community denied that Jesus had come “in the flesh.” Some believed that Jesus was an excellent and wise teacher, but nothing more. They drew a distinction between the man Jesus and “the Christ”—a spiritual being who descended upon the physical Jesus at his baptism and left before his death on the cross.

The term for this belief was Docetism (from the Greek *dokeō*), which means, “to seem.” The idea here was that Jesus only *appeared* to be human and only *seemed* to suffer and die.

There were many different variations of some of these beliefs, but the big picture is that less than a century after that first Easter, the church was already plagued by disputes about whether Jesus of Nazareth really was God incarnate, really *did* suffer and die, and really *was* raised from the dead.

(This is worth remembering in our cultural context where many often imagine that skepticism about some of the radical claims of Easter is somehow unique or represents a uniquely modern and enlightened position. These ideas have been around for a very long time.)

At any rate, 1 John is a good book to explore in the Easter season, once the joy and the hope and the beauty of the Easter event begin to fade and life returns to normal, once we perhaps begin to have our doubts.

Did that really happen? Was Jesus literally raised from the dead? What does it mean? What, actually, can we hope for?

1 John talks about these things. And so, whenever we don't have a special Sunday between now and Pentecost, I will be focusing on the lectionary texts from 1 John. I think it will give us some good windows into what it means to live as “resurrection people.”

Today, I want to simply look at two aspects of this text from 1 John 3.

Verses 1-2 focus on the nature of our hope as Christians because of the love of God made plain at Easter.

Verses 3-7 talk about our response to this love.

I want to look at these in reverse order, beginning with our response. This might seem backward, but hopefully my reasons for doing so will be clear.

In verse 3, John says, “And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he [Jesus] is pure.”

Purity is not a very popular word any more, whether inside or outside of the church.

It calls to mind all kinds of overbearing, moralistic attempts to enforce proper behaviour when some of us were younger.

The warning to “keep yourself pure” often conveyed the idea that the life of faith was mostly about what you *didn't* do, rather than about what you *did*.

Does the purity John is talking involved a constant obsessing over sin? Is sinlessness the mark of a true disciple of Jesus?

John seems to be saying this at the end of this passage:

You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. **No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.**

Does John think that real Christians stop sinning?

No. We need only to rewind about two chapters to 1 John 1 to see this:

If we say that we have no sin, *we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* **9** If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **10** *If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

Or, we could look at chapter 2:

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; **2** and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world

So, John is well aware that Christians will always stumble and fall.

What he is referring to, I think, is our inner disposition and our general orientation in life.

I like how N.T. Wright puts it in his commentary on this passage:

What [John] is talking about here is the whole habit of life, ‘going on sinning’, sinning as the regular mode in which we live. We should be doing our best to avoid all kinds of sin, all the time, though we shall surely fail; but **the failures must take place within a settled habit of life in which sin is no longer setting the tone.**¹

Nevertheless, Christian history contains no shortage of people who have obsessed over sin—or, often more accurately, over the sins of *other people*—and have made personal purity the primary if not the *sole* mark of what it means to be faithful to Jesus.

Every few months or so, I get an envelope here at the church from a guy in Winnipeg. I don’t know the man, but I think he is an acquaintance of our former interim pastor Harold Peters-Fransen.

These letters are hand-written and usually cover a wide range of barely coherent theological and political musings. It’s usually very difficult to understand what he’s trying to say or why as he provides no context for his writings.

This week, I received eight hand-written pages (both sides) of hand-copied portions of a Bible commentary on the book of Proverbs. It was written almost exclusively in pencil, except for, I presume, the parts that he wanted me (or whoever read it) to pay attention to.

These were highlighted in bold, blue ink. They were words and sentence fragments like: “an evildoer gives heed to...” and “calamity” and “will not go unpunished” and “furnace” and “rebuke” and “a fool.”

¹ N.T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters For Everyone: James, Peter, John and Judah* (London: SPCK, 2011), 151.

On and on this went for eight pages. I was pretty tired of reading about sin by the end.

This level of “concern” about sin is not really the norm in the twenty-first century church, is it?

The church has, for the most part, stopped being the purity police and tried to both be better at loving *all* of our neighbours *and* to acknowledge our own brokenness and need of a Saviour.

This is good.

But I sometimes wonder if the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. I wonder if we have failed to take the call to purity seriously *enough*, particularly in our unique cultural context.

I thought of this as I read, of all things, a book of philosophy!

In Matthew Crawford’s *The World Beyond Your Head*,² he talks about “the burden of self-regulation” in a world where individual “rights” and autonomy and freedom of self-determination are often seen to be the highest (even *only*) values to which we aspire.

In the past, he argues, human behaviour was constrained by certain cultural, social, and religious norms that, while certainly open to abuse, had the effect of keeping people from certain destructive behaviours, whether on an individual or corporate level.

With these norms mostly a thing of the past (for a variety of reasons, some good, some bad), and with most people having little use for anything like an external “mortal authority,” the burden falls to the *individual* to regulate their own behaviour.

Crawford argues that we are not doing so well with this.

We generally live in a Western world where human beings are prisoners to excess, whether it is entertainment or food or alcohol or technology or sex or any number of the other things that we consistently fail to appreciate in moderation.

We are not very good self-regulators, Crawford bluntly says. And it would be hard to argue with him, based on a quick glance around at our culture.

² Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming and Individual in an Age of Distraction*. New York: Allen Lane, 2015.

Are we much different in the church? Are we any better at disciplining our appetites in pursuit of a higher vision?

Perhaps we as the people of the resurrected one could *use* a reminder that we *are* called to purity—that we are called to something far bigger and better and more life giving than individual autonomy and self-determination as the highest goals of a human life.

Indeed, those of us who follow Jesus, could *always* use the reminder that to be a Christian is to have deliberately *relinquished* self-determination as our highest value.

In its place, we put Christ's vision for human life, and our desire put on *his* character.

As Paul says in Galatians 2,

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

But.

Our pursuit of purity as Christians is *not* in response to a severe, demanding, punitive God who has arbitrary commands that must be followed in order to attain his favour or somehow earn salvation.

Rather, the pursuit of purity ought always to be a response of gratitude, a response to the love of God that has been *lavished* upon us, the love that has given itself for us.

Which brings us back to the beginning of our text today:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and *that is what we are...*

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

We don't know *all* of the implications for the future made possible by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We don't know what the new creation will look like. We don't know what *we* will look like.

And John acknowledges this to the church or churches he is writing to.

What we will be has not yet been revealed.

But according to John, we *do* know two things.

First, we are God's children now.

We are loved, chosen, forgiven, adopted into the family of God, heirs of the promise.

This is what we are.

Second, we will be like him.

This is, in the end, the only point of striving for purity in the world—that our lives *now* would begin to anticipate what they will *one day be* when we see Jesus.

When, to quote from Wright again, “our blindness is cured” and we “***gaze and gaze on the face through which God has loved us so much.***”³

We will be like him.

We might bristle at the notion that we will be “like” anyone but our wonderfully unique individual selves.

But I don't think John means that we will all be identical, that our individual identities will be wiped out and we will all be a bunch of indistinguishable Jesus-looking automatons.

I think it simply means that will be will be like Jesus in his very nature—incorruptible, eternal. That we will be like him in his character—that we will love truly and completely, just as he has loved us.

That we will be the people we were made to be, because we will be with the one who made us, the one who saved us, and the one who has brought us home.

³ Wright, 149-50.

I want to close with a comment that was overheard at Bible Study on Thursday night as we were discussing some of these matters.

After a conversation about what the new creation might look like and all of the unknowns of the future, one person said, simply: “I think it will be a good surprise.”

I am convinced that this is true. Whatever is to come, whatever it looks like, however it all plays out, **it will be good because it will look like Jesus and his kingdom of peace.**

May God help us to be people whose lives are always lived in response to the love that God has lavished upon us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

