

**SERMON TITLE:** “Who Is It That Conquers the World?”

**TEXT:** 1 John 5:1-5; John 15:9-17

**PREACHED AT:** Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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**DATE:** May 13, 2012/6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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I’ve spent a lot of time driving over the past few days.

For the most part, I like driving. It gives me a chance to be quiet, to think, to pray, and to catch up on sermons and podcasts that I regularly listen to.

One of these podcasts is CBC Radio’s religion program called *Ideas*. Yesterday, on the way home from Medicine Hat from a soccer tournament, I listened to a fascinating episode entitled “After Atheism: New Perspectives on God and Religion.”

The program had to do with the relationship between faith and doubt in our late modern times, and what faith looks and feels like in a social and psychological context characterized by a bewildering array of religious options, and by a general climate of skepticism and even hostility toward religious faith.

In the modern world, according to the professor interviewed on this program, to believe in the Christian faith is to affirm something that has had huge challenges posed to it—challenges which are experienced at the **broad cultural level**, where Christianity no longer enjoys the taken-for-grantedness that it once did, as well as at the **personal level**, where individual people are increasingly having to navigate religious belief in the context of huge pressures and challenges that did not exist in previous eras.

What are some of these challenges?

- Challenge of biblical scholarship which showed the Bible to be something different than we perhaps once thought or assumed it was (we spent some time talking about this at our MCA theological studies conference in Calgary this week)
- Challenge of science:
  - o Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* challenged notions of the created world being a finely-tuned, perfectly ordered machine
  - o An increasing awareness of the size of our universe and of how the earth we inhabit is only one tiny little planet in vast, dark, uninhabitable cosmos
- The tools of reason increasingly being applied to all domains of human life and an increasing skepticism about what could not be empirically verified and tested
- An increasing awareness of the sins of the church, the disunity and fractiousness that followed the Protestant Reformation, and the general distance between Christianity’s professed ideals and its track record on the ground

The combined result of these and other factors, according to the professor, was that, from around the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward, belief has been harder.

Believing now takes place in the context of doubt. It takes place in the full knowledge that in affirming Christian faith we are affirming something that *can* be—and routinely *is*—denied.

And there is no going back to the days when this was not the case. We cannot *undo* modernity. We cannot undo the Scientific Revolution, the rise of historical criticism of Scripture, the Enlightenment, the Wars of Religion, the Protestant Reformation, or any of the other things that have led us to where we are today.

Paul Ricoeur, in a book called *The Symbolism of Evil*, and after describing something like the situation above, spoke of a desire to “hear again”—to arrive at a “second naiveté” where faith did not have to be negotiated in the context of all this doubt.

But we cannot transport ourselves into another time and place or into another set of social and psychological conditions. We are where we are and this is where our faith must be understood and expressed.

To be clear, not everyone’s feels these pressures in the same way, but for many this general picture makes faith difficult to embrace or maintain.

Many people today would echo the words of nineteenth century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky:

*It is not as a child that I believe and confess Jesus Christ. My hosanna is born of a furnace of doubt.*

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Well, perhaps you are thinking, “that’s all very interesting, but what does all of this have to do with our passages this morning?”

1 John is all about love, after all, not the psychological and existential difficulties of faith in the modern era.

But 1 John also has to do with faith and doubt and holding on to belief in difficult circumstances.

It is near the end of the first century—50 or 60 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Christian community has been around long enough to begin to establish itself in the Roman Empire, but also long enough to start to fight about beliefs.

Some false teachers were causing dissent, arguing that Jesus did not really come in the flesh—that he came as a Spirit—and that his death was not a true atonement for sin.

There is some dispute about the nature and scope of the division, and how or if it related to other tensions around how to understand Jewish customs and beliefs in the context of this new, at this point still largely Jewish faith.

There was also the constant pressure of affirming beliefs that were not popular in or accepted by the Roman Empire. The first Christians were called “atheists” because they refused to worship the divinity of the Emperor or any of the other official deities of Rome.

For roughly the first three centuries of Christianity’s existence in the Roman Empire, it was a despised, marginalized, ridiculed, and persecuted group.

So—pressures and conflict from within and pressures from without. The church John was writing to faced both internal and external challenges to maintaining and practicing faith in Jesus.

John’s letter is an attempt to encourage these Christians in their faith to remind them of who Jesus is and what it means.

But *how* does he do this? It’s very interesting to consider John’s approach.

Rather than explicitly laying out all of the various intellectual and religious options, or offering a blow-by-blow rebuttal of competing positions, or tracing the historical origins of the various challenges to belief, or arguing for a new conception of faith more suitable for the times, **he points to the connection between what we believe and what we do and how this, fundamentally, reveals our relationship to Jesus.**

John’s argument goes something like this:

1. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ (or Messiah) has been born of God
2. Everyone who loves the parent loves the child.

Therefore: Because we love Jesus, we ought to love his children (i.e., fellow Christians)

But then, the formula is reversed.

1. We can know that we love God’s children (fellow Christians) if we love God.
2. We can know we love God if we obey his commandments.

And what are these commandments? Well, for this we could go to any number of places. We could go only one chapter prior. 1 John 4:21 says this:

*The commandment we have from [God] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

We could also go to another book written by John—the Gospel of John—where our second reading this morning comes from.

<sup>12</sup> My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command. <sup>15</sup> I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Similar statements can be found throughout the book of 1 John.

It's not very complicated: **Love each other**. That's it. Just love each other.

That's how we can know that we love God. That's how we can know and demonstrate that we believe that Jesus is the Christ.

There is an intimate connection between belief and action throughout John's writings and, indeed, throughout all of Scripture. They cannot be separated. We act on what we believe and we demonstrate what we believe through how we act.

We can know that we love God and believe in his Son by how we love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

As John says, this is not a burdensome command (one thinks here of Jesus' words about the heavy burdens the Pharisees placed on people in Matthew 23:4). Why not?

Because whatever is born of God conquers the world:

- Not "the world" as in the *cosmos* that God so loved that he gave his only son (John 3:16)
- Rather, "the world" as in the present secular order
  - o characterized by sin and disobedience and injustice and suffering
  - o the world that is the result of a determined effort to ignore God and his purposes
  - o the world that is under the influence of the evil one

The world that is described thus in 1 John 2:15-16:

<sup>15</sup> Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. <sup>16</sup> For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.

This is the world that needs to be overcome.

***Based on our two passages from the pen of John, we can, I think, put it like this. Those who believe that Jesus is God's anointed one love the way Jesus did—laying down our lives for our friends—and in so doing, conquer the world.***

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On April 14-15—the first two days of our arrival in Colombia—there was an event being held about 600 km north of Bogotá in the beautiful coastal resort city of Cartagena. An event that, apparently, was even more prestigious and significant than a handful of Canadian pastors visiting the country!

The 6<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Americas was taking place—a meeting of some of the most powerful and influential people in the world, including our very own Stephen Harper.

They were, in a sense, talking about how to “conquer” the world—how to conquer problems of inequality, how to conquer landscapes which contained untapped minerals for extraction, how to conquer wealth and prosperity for all.

It was a meeting full of big people with big plans involving big money.

Two days after the conclusion of the Summit of the Americas, our group found ourselves in a part of Bogotá that I have already referred to called Cazucá. At one point, we were visiting a project called “El Progreso,” which was jointly funded by the Mennonite Brethren Church, MCC, and private donors.

Here, we met a man named David who, with his wife and two children, lived in Cazucá and devoted most of his time and energy to running El Progreso. Like many other projects in Cazucá, it was part church, part daycare, part soup kitchen, part community college (they offered sewing and computer classes there), part library, and more.

Pastor David was a soft-spoken man but was happy to tell us about El Progreso, and to answer any of our questions. At one point, we began to express an interest in *his* story. We knew that he had voluntarily chosen to live and work in this place. We knew that he had chosen to bring his wife and children to live in a context of violence and poverty and suffering.

Why? At one point, I asked David if there was some event or experience that he could point to that had convinced him to come to a place like this.

He looked at me, and said, “Well, I think I read the same Bible you do. And the Bible I read tells me that Jesus emptied himself and became nothing to serve and love others. I’m not Jesus, but I’m trying to imitate him.”

Talk about a sobering moment.

We later heard more of David's story. He came from the city of Bogotá, which has a six-strata system of labeling neighbourhoods and regions of the city for tax purposes. Regions that are designated "Strata 6" are the wealthiest ones and pay the most tax. Strata one are the poorest regions and, consequently, pay the least tax.

David had come from a Strata 6 neighbourhood. He had a career as a model where he made a lot of money. All of his family continued to live there—they thought he was crazy for doing what he had done. Cazucá wasn't even a Strata 1—it wasn't even classified. It would probably be a zero.

***Who is it that conquers the world?***

The suits and decision-makers cloistered in their heavily guarded luxury hotels in Cartagena?

Or Pastor David, loving and working with the poorest of the poor in a forgotten part of Colombia?

The important people of power and privilege in a magnificent luxury resort by the sea?

Or a soft-spoken man and his family who are committed to following the pattern of Jesus in the world—a pattern of self-emptying, self-sacrificing, laying down his life for his friends?

Who is it that conquers the world?

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The question is asked and answered all over the world in the beliefs and actions of ordinary people.

It is asked of us.

How is that which resists the purposes of God conquered in *our* country? In *our* community? In *our* families? In *our* lives?

How do we know if *our* faith and love for God is true in the context of doubt and skepticism and innumerable pressures against belief, whether of intellectual or experiential variety?

The same way as those John was writing to two thousand years ago.

By the persistent, determined, resourceful efforts of followers of Jesus to love each other. To love with *agape* love—love that lays down its own needs and rather chooses to seek what is best for and in each other.

It is fine and good to examine the cultural contexts in which our faith is negotiated. It is good to understand the pressures that face us and the challenges of religious belief in late modernity.

But, as our text today shows us, the point isn't it to somehow manufacture or ratchet up our level of cognitive certainty in what we believe in and of itself. Our belief is manifested in what we do.

If we are experiencing doubt and frustration in our faith, perhaps the best thing we can do is to focus on loving our brothers and sisters well.

This is how we demonstrate who we believe Jesus to be. This is how we show our love for God.

This is how a world determined to ignore God is overcome.

It may not always or even often *look* or *feel* like our faith is overcoming the world.

I don't imagine it did for a fledgling church in a hostile Roman Empire. I certainly don't think many would have looked at El Progreso on that hillside in Cazucá and concluded that those people were achieving much of a victory over the world.

But as Christians, this is nothing new for us. This is our pattern. We follow one whose method of overcoming of the world has always seemed very unlikely. We follow the one who laid down his life for his friends, and one who has chosen and appointed us to do the same, bearing fruit that will last.

This is who overcomes the world.

Thanks be to God.