

Christ Like Love

6th Sunday in Easter May 5, 2024

1 John 5:1-8

“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God...”

Dear friends in Christ,

I. Water and Blood

Of the apostles, different sources tell us that it was St. John who lived the longest. After Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and the apostles witnessed the baptism of 3000. Persecution broke out soon after, driving believers out of Jerusalem; but they took the Gospel with them, and the Church grew. Persecution grew, too, off and on; and different sources tell us that each of the apostles—except John—died as a martyr for the faith. The truth of God’s Word is, of course, a matter of faith that is worked by the Holy Spirit; but while so many argue against the Resurrection, it seems a convincing proof to me that those men were willing to suffer rather than deny the truth -- that Jesus is risen indeed. It wasn’t a fanciful myth for these eyewitnesses. They had hope they were willing to die for.

So the Word spread. And by the work of the Holy Spirit, many believed. Often under adverse circumstances, the Church grew. Then along came Cerinthus. Cerinthus wasn’t a violent persecutor. He was a false teacher, and his message was essentially this: you’ve got your version of Jesus and I’ve got mine, and mine makes a lot more sense than yours. Cerinthus’ ideas weren’t all that sensible, though: his strange mix included a faraway God who wanted nothing to do with the world, which had been created by angels who didn’t know about God.

Meanwhile, Cerinthus said that a man named Jesus had lived, and had been possessed by a deity named “Christ” for a while; in his system, “Christ” took over Jesus at the waters of His Baptism, and departed from Jesus **before** He shed His blood on the cross.

Cerinthus’ ideas were bizarre. Scholars say that he mixed the ideas of at least four different religions of the day (Judaism, Gnosticism, Chiliasm and Ebionitism). He served up his doctrinal cocktail and proclaimed, “Trust me. My mishmash of teachings must be true—far truer than what those eyewitnesses of Jesus have been saying.” This is always the temptation of sinful man – the desire to improve upon the revelation of God. It’s attractive to teachers who desire to feed their egos by adding to God’s Word, and it’s attractive to hearers who want to throw off the yoke of absolute truth: after all, if you can’t say for sure exactly what God says, then you have room to maneuver – to twist it to your personal interpretation, or simply ignore His Word altogether. But here is the problem: if God’s Word is uncertain, then so is forgiveness and salvation. Then there is only doubt, and then there is no hope.

So, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John wrote this epistle to declare the reality of the Gospel: the Christian faith is real. John writes: “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him.” First off, Jesus was the Christ, not some everyday guy that some spirit took over for a while. He was begotten of the Father from eternity, not just a mere human who was used by God for a while. “The two natures of Jesus, human and divine, are real,” wrote John to those early Christians, “and so your hope is real.”

John continues: “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.”

If Jesus was truly the Son of God, then His Word was real. His commandments were real and binding. In other words, His laws weren't just one more code of ethics that people could choose to live by—they were God's Word for man, all of man. They were real and binding, with blessings and consequences.

Furthermore, wrote John, this meant that those early Christians were to love each other, serve each other, bear each other's burdens. They weren't a random group of strangers who happened by the same Tim Hortons; they were fellow believers for whom Christ died. And united to Christ, by Baptism they were brothers and sisters in a far more eternal way than brothers and sisters by birth.

John continued: “For everyone who is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world -- our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” Here was the payoff: because Jesus was real and His Word was real, the promises were real, too. Christ had overcome the world by His life, death and resurrection; and He gave that victory to all who believed in Him. Believed: for now, it was a matter of faith, not sight. Jesus was no longer on earth for them to see and touch.

So, how could those Christians know this? Because they had reliable witnesses—far more than those apostles who were willing to die rather than deny that Jesus was risen from the dead: God Himself was the witness: “This is He who came by water and blood -- Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth.”

Water and blood, baptism and cross. On the one hand, you had Cerinthus the heretic, who on his own authority declared that some “Christ” spirit showed up at Jesus' baptism and left before the cross. John had better news, and the Holy Trinity to back it up. For God the Father declared that Jesus was the Christ at the water, at Jesus' baptism. There the Father declared, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” God the Son declared He was Jesus Christ at the blood—at the cross—as He prayed, “Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit.” Then the Christ was pierced in His side, and blood and water flowed. And the Holy Spirit continued that proclamation through John and the rest of the apostles, so that we might have a sure, prophetic Word.

Cerinthus came with a mishmash of teachings that fed his ego but offered no hope. John declared to Christians, “You have something far better. Jesus **is** the Christ. He has died and He is risen. Your hope is real.”

2. Real Savior, Real Hope

We just finished Holy Week and celebrated the Resurrection of our Lord. We restored the alleluias and the Gloria in Excelsis, and we shouted “He is risen indeed!” It was a big festival, and rightly so: if Christ isn't raised from the dead, we are most of all to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:19). But Christ is risen from the dead.

Meanwhile, Cerinthus has returned. Various medias thought it would help out Easter if they interviewed scholars who have their own pet theories about Jesus—that He wasn't really God, that He wasn't really crucified, He didn't really rise or that He was in cahoots with Pilate to fake His death. The “Gospel of Judas” was suddenly discovered as an ancient writing. My favorite was the professor who suggested that

Jesus didn't really walk on water, but was walking on a moving piece of ice instead. Then, the bestselling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, was made into a movie with a high-powered cast; and the plot of the story is that every story about Jesus is true, except those that you find in the Bible. (The Church just mercilessly crushed all the other theories and promoted the Bible in order to keep its power and agenda going.)

That's religion in North America today, where one of the greatest gods is choice. Rather than rejoice in the singular truth of Jesus' incarnation at Christmas, society has to celebrate a diversity of traditions to insist that no one really has the truth. Rather than declare the astounding hope of the Resurrection, the world celebrates the Easter season by telling you why you shouldn't have hope. Rather than proclaim that God became man to save, the world reduces Jesus to an abstract symbol so that salvation is just a good feeling on the way to the grave. Cerinthus is alive and well it seems. Actually, Cerinthus is as dead as he's always been, and he's trying to take you with him. That's why it's good to hear this epistle and rejoice in what is true. Because Christ is risen, your life is a new life in Him.

"Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" John writes. You may hear that as "old news," but it remains **Good** News. In the risen Christ, you have new life. You gather here to confess that Jesus isn't just an extraordinary man who lived and died. History is full of extraordinary men and women who managed to do that. Nor do you confess that Jesus is just a feel-good experience: there are a lot of those around, too. You confess that Jesus is the Christ—the Son of God who became man for you.

He became real flesh and shed real blood as He died a real death for your sins. And because He is the Christ, you are born of God. He's made you His child by water and the Word. Because Jesus Christ is risen and lives forever, you will be raised and live forever, too. **That's** your comfort in the face of death: for the sake of the real Jesus Christ, you really will be raised from the dead. Oh, no: do not dismiss this as old news and cease to think about it, because to lose this truth is to lose the hope of heaven.

One starts to understand the quiet desperation of the world when one considers that it has no hope for eternity. But you are not lost in the world; as long as you are here, God has gathered you into His family—a real community that you belong to even now.

"Everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. We love the children of God." With a new life comes a new family. This congregation is the Church, the body of Christ in this place. You, too, are not mere strangers who happen to stop for coffee in the same place. You are brothers and sisters in Christ: you are sitting with your fellow-redeemed, those for whom Christ died. The Holy Spirit has gathered you together in this place for His reasons. He speaks to you here. He leads you together to the altar to feed you the Son's body and blood. That's why you learn the names of the people next to you. That's why you pray for them. That's why you rejoice with them in their joys and bear their burdens as you're able. That's why you forgive slights and offenses. You are the body of Christ. Now, if Christ is not risen as the world says, it makes sense to be strangers who come and go, taking what you can get out of it. But Christ is risen! And if Christ is risen, then part of our new life is to love one another. That's part of the gift of grace: the Lord has gathered you into a family that lives forever.

Furthermore, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome." With new life comes new obedience. Because Jesus is the Christ, crucified and risen, you live by the Law of God—you strive to keep and obey His commandments. If Jesus were not risen, it wouldn't matter, for you'd have no hope of redemption. But Christ is risen, and you are set free

from sin—set free to obey God’s commandments. To break them now, willingly and intentionally, is to say far worse than you want to sin: it is to declare that you choose sin and death over the grace and life that no less than the Son of God has suffered and died to give you. It’s really both to scorn the cross and doubt the resurrection of Jesus—for if He has died for you and is risen again, then He will return to judge. It would be foolish to throw away His grace and life, in exchange for sin and hell. And so you keep His commandments—and for you, says our text, His commandments are not burdensome.

You keep them, and you rejoice to keep them. Now, if you still break them—or if you find them difficult to keep or resent how they accuse you, this demonstrates your sinful nature. This shows you your need for the Savior. This sends you back to Him to confess your sins and be forgiven, to look forward to the Last Day when His Law is no longer a burden.

Because Christ has overcome the world and shares that victory with you, you have overcome the world. Sin and death and devil and world cannot make you bow the knee and surrender to them, because Jesus declares He’s overcome these foes for you. Where you still sin, again you confess those sins and rejoice in the forgiveness that Jesus has won—for by that grace He restores His victory to you once more. Where you face death, you do so with the certain hope that victory over death is yours: Christ has shattered the tomb, and He will shatter your grave and raise you up, too.

Remember, though: although you are sons and daughters of the king, you’re still in a foreign land. The kingdom of heaven is yours, but you don’t see it yet. Meanwhile, the world continues to sneer at the hope that you have...so how do you know that it’s yours? By faith, says the Lord: “This is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” You don’t see the victory with your eyes yet, but you hear it with your ears—and that victory is yours in Christ.

How do you know? In the midst of all the doubts cast upon the resurrection by scholars and all the fables that the world promotes, how do you know that you have new life in Christ? Because you have better witnesses than speculations in news magazines or feature films. Listen: “This is He who came by water and blood -- Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth.”

The Lord declared in His Word that truth was to be established by two or three witnesses, and He gives them to you here: water, blood and Spirit. The water of Jesus’ Baptism is a witness, because there the Father called Jesus His beloved Son. Now, the water and Word of your Baptism declares today that you are God’s beloved child, for Jesus’ sake. Are you baptized? Then the victory over death and the kingdom of heaven are yours in Christ.

The blood of Christ, shed on the cross testifies: it is the witness that the price has been paid for your redemption. But like the water, the blood is not just a witness in the past; but even now you receive Christ’s body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. Even now, that Supper declares to you— and gives to you—that victory over sin and death. For even now, the Holy Spirit is at work by Word and Sacrament, delivering you from the doubts and death of Cerinthus’ world to life everlasting. In Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, you have new life: because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.