

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
I John 4: 19-5:5
“Love and Belief/Belief and Love”
6th Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2015

There are two main themes which are woven throughout I John from which today’s Scripture lesson comes. They are belief in Jesus Christ and love for one another. (1) These themes are the bookends of today’s Scripture lesson. One of the themes—love for one another which has its genesis in God’s love for us--surfaces in the first verse of today’s Scripture lesson; the second theme—belief in Jesus Christ— is found in the final verse of the reading. Listen for the themes, and listen for God’s word to you.

.....

Today is a great day at Davidson College Presbyterian Church. Today 26 eighth graders take the step of saying “yes” for themselves to the baptismal vows that their parents and a congregation made to and for them when they were much younger. You have spent nine months meeting in small groups every other week, delving into what the church believes and what you believe. You participated in the Day of Service along with your small groups. You did homework when you had to miss a small group session. You worked hard on your faith statements – some of you producing extraordinary written statements that were prose or, in one case, poetry, others of you presenting your faith through various artistic media - painting, photography, technology- and you presented them to the Session last Sunday afternoon over ice cream.

You have been phenomenal, but you know that you couldn’t have done this without the support of some very important people. So I want to give these very important people a pastoral shout-out. A big shout-out to your parents who made promises way back when you were a cute little tyke dressed in your great-grandmother’s lacy white baptismal gown, promises that they would live the Christian faith and teach it to you as you grew and matured. They have kept their promises in a big way these past nine months, making sure that you showed up for confirmation, doing their own homework as you did yours when circumstances dictated that you miss a session, praying for you as you have approached this milestone in your life of faith.

I also want to give a shout-out to ten very, very special people. This year’s confirmation preparation followed a new format for DCPC which was centered in small groups. We prayed for God to raise up nine particular small group leaders who possess the gifts of spiritual maturity and a love for and rapport with people who are your age and who, when presented with the invitation to enter into this relationship with this year’s confirmation class, sensed that the Holy Spirit was in the call for them personally and were willing to make this nine-month long commitment. God has worked mightily through Jack Ahearn, Riley Burgess, Tim Stroud, Adrienne Rothrock, Gavin McCall, Rosemary Klein, Ben Klein, Christina Tarry, and Wallace Tarry. And in addition to them, our youth educator Sonia Lee has been the glue holding it all together.

You and the confirmation process have been a personal blessing to me. I loved writing the curriculum which was based on the Apostles’ Creed with last summer’s intern Emily Wilkes because I learned a lot as Emily and I shared our perspectives. I have loved getting to know you better and witnessing the special gifts that God has placed within you and imagining how you are going to bless the churches of which you are a part in the years to come.

It is a great day here at DCPC. It is a great day to read from I John for it has some important things to say to you and to all of us who are loving, supporting, and praying for you today on your confirmation and who are being reminded of our own professions of faith and in a sense renewing our own vows as you make yours today.

I mentioned before reading the Scripture that today’s Scripture lesson contains two bookends which are the two main themes of this New Testament book, one bookend being about belief in Jesus Christ and then about loving one another. The two bookends aren’t really separate things. David Rensburger is a New Testament scholar who has written a splendid little book about the Epistles of John, and he writes, “These two themes are brought into such close relationship with one another that it is impossible to treat them completely separately. I John considers love and belief together as a single two-sided response to the fact that God sent Jesus into the world as a sacrifice for our sins.” (2)

With that caveat that love and belief can't really be separated, I want to talk first about belief and invite you to remember what we talked about way back in September when you began confirmation, that is, the first part of the Apostles' Creed: I believe in God the Father Almighty.

I believe in God the Father Almighty is a central theological theme for all Christians, but we Presbyterians make an especially big deal of it. We put it in capital letters and highlight it in bold underlined italics and call it **THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD**. It is at the root of our worship and at the center of how we organize ourselves as a church. What it means is that God is God and you and I are not God. Christiana Brueggemann who was confirmed three years ago presented a memorable minute for mission last fall during our stewardship season, and she summarized it this way: It's not about you.

Ted Wardlaw is the president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary now, but he was once sitting where you are. He didn't have small groups though to prepare him for confirmation. What he had to do was to go to church every Saturday morning and sit in the office of Miss Wista McElveen, the church's Director of Christian Education, and she would ask him the questions in the Westminster Child's Catechism. She would say, "Teddy, what is the chief end of man?" which is the first question of the catechism. And he would say, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Ted writes, "That would be a great caption to splash beneath the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God: our chief end is not to glorify ourselves, but to glorify and enjoy God. It's not simply to grow bigger churches, it's not to win souls, it's not even to figure out how to earn our own salvation. In fact, John Calvin, our theological father in the faith, thought that to be preoccupied with your own salvation was selfish. Don't you hear people say all the time, "I want a church that meets my needs;" Calvin would say, "That's selfish." We are not faithful, he said, in order to satisfy our own needs or to find meaning in our lives, but only because God has created us and called us to God's service. The cornerstone of our tradition is this preoccupation with the sovereignty of this big God, and everything else about our life as a church stems from that." (3)

Everything about church stems from our belief in a sovereign God who made the divine self-known in the human being Jesus. And this leads me to say something now about the second major theme of I John, love for one another within the church.

It is important to understand that when I John wrote these words he was doing so in the midst of a horrendous church fight. There were controversies swirling around certain members of the Johannine community. Some people had actually walked away from the church altogether.

I mention this because it has specific meaning here and now for you as you make your profession of faith.

Since the day that I was confirmed as you are being confirmed today, the Presbyterian Church has split 3 times. We have reunited once too.. in 1983 mending the split that took place during the Civil War and brought our neighbors over at Davidson Presbyterian Church and our congregation back into the same denomination, thanks be to God. But we have failed to hang together three times. The latest split with some Presbyterian churches leaving this denomination to start a new one called Evangelical Covenanting Order of Presbyterian is happening right now.

As I have thought about this most recent split in the Presbyterian church and the questions that you will be answering at your confirmation, I've been taken back to the questions that I was asked not only when I was confirmed, but when I became, first, a ruling elder, and then later, a teaching elder which you have learned is another term for minister.

When I was ordained as a ruling elder in 1977 and as a teaching elder in 1979, there were many ordination questions I was asked, but the one I have thought the most about ever since, hands down, was this one: "Do you promise subjection to your brothers and sisters in the Lord?" That was a counter-cultural word then, and it's a counter-cultural word now. The question has been modified a bit since then. It became, "Will you be governed by our church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?" The assumption behind both of these particular questions—the older one and the newer one—is that, in the church, an absolute "given" is that there will be conflict, differences of opinion. It was true in I John's day, and it is true in our own day.

Living in church world means living and worshiping with and loving, yes loving people with whom one disagrees. Church isn't the final night of Massanetta and Montreat each and every day. As a member of Christ's church, you are going to find yourself in situations where you disagree. It may happen that you feel hurt by something that someone says or does. It may happen that you inflict hurt on someone else. When this happens,

you may be tempted to respond in one of two ways: by retreating into a faction where you are with people who agree with you or to leave the church altogether.

I John would say to both of these urges: Don't. Instead, recommit yourself to loving one another as God loves you. Ted Wardlaw whom I mentioned earlier was invited to speak to the members of Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas, TX, when they were considering whether or not to leave the PCUSA for ECO. He said, "I will never forget one particular presbytery meeting when I was still in Atlanta. It was a tedious day of difficult decisions, and divided votes, and acrimony everywhere. And at the end of the day, when it was finally time to adjourn, there was palpable joy when relief was in sight and we were called to our feet for the closing prayer by the Moderator. He was a pastor there in Atlanta and was a man of prayer. His prayers were equal parts simple and profound, as if he had curled his toes over the edge of Heaven itself. He said, "Let us pray," and there was a moment of silence. Finally, he opened his mouth and said, "Lord, we are forever asking you for many things...and what you forever give us instead, over and over again, is the gift of each other." It is a gift when we hang in there together." (4)

I was thinking about what hanging in there and being in subjection to one's brothers and sisters in the church looks like, and about how I John wrote that this kind of obedience isn't burdensome. (because honestly, it sometimes feels burdensome, downright hard, downright impossible to love people in the same way that God loves us.)

And it came to me when I heard our hometown hero Steph Curry give his acceptance speech after being named MVP for the NBA. One of the many people he called out to thank is Eric Housen. Steph called Eric, "Best equipment manager in the NBA." He admitted that NBA players can sometimes be a little needy. (Ya think?) They lose socks, and it's their fault. Steph said of Eric, "he probably has a better title" (I looked him up on the Golden State Warriors website and he doesn't. I also learned that he has been the equipment manager since 1999 and that there was – and maybe still is – a Warrior whose road trip breakfast had to be Fruit Loops with goat's milk and it was Eric's job to make sure he got it.) Having something like that in my job would make me cranky, I tell you. But every game day, Eric puts a pair of shoes in front of Steph's locker, laces them up, and puts a Sharpie in them so that Steph can write a Bible verse which glorifies God on his shoes. Steph said, "That means a lot, man that means a lot."

Look at Eric Housen, and I think you have a pretty good picture of what it looks like for the church to live so that the world sees that life is not ultimately about us. It is about glorifying our sovereign God. It is about loving other people because God first loved us.

1. David Rensberger, *The Epistles of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 4.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Theodore J. Wardlaw, "That We May Be One," a presentation made to members of Highland Park Presbyterian Church, Dallas, TX, on October 14, 2013, as they prepared to vote on leaving the Presbyterian Church (USA) and joining the Evangelical Covenanting Order of Presbyterians.
4. *Ibid.*