

April 15, 2018

I John 2: 3-11

Prayer: Dear Lord, In the aftermath of Easter, help us to see how we should live as Easter people. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Easter People

Some of you may remember a student who worshiped with us during her four years at Furman. Her name was Shelley Martin and she was a striking redhead. A lot of times she'd sing with a jimbay drummer behind her.

The reason I love to have college and seminary students in worship and in the art room – besides their energy and sense of fun – is that I believe what they see, what they hear, what they learn at Triune, will impact the rest of their lives.

Shelley is a good example. Her home was right down the road in Atlanta, Georgia. But the minute she graduated from Furman in 2011, she moved to Kenya and has lived in Africa ever since. Now she's working in Uganda, which borders Kenya.

She's worked with a group of people with HIV to start a poultry business.

She's worked with an environmental group to compost organic waste and recycle plastics from a landfill.

She's helped develop markets for crafts made by special needs children, elderly women and AIDS patients.

And now in Uganda, she's working to empower women.

In one of her blogs, Shelley talked about a Kenyan woman she had grown close to. Shosho was 86, and Shelley maybe 24 when they met.

Shosho had spent her life helping the people of her village. Ten of her 16 children had died, but she adopted many orphans whose parents had died of AIDS. She introduced Shelley to a young boy with HIV, and these unlikely friends – this 20-something from Atlanta, and this 80-something from Africa – walked with him through his last year of life.

Together, Shelley wrote, they walked Shosho's "family's burial lands and picked peas in the gardens, filtered water and mapped community assets, ate fresh eggs and hung gutters, chased school kids and built livestock structures."

Shosho opened her home when Shelley had friends from the States visit. And when Shelley's grandmother died back in Georgia, Shosho gave her a live chicken to send home to the mourners.

Shosho died at 91, having taught her young American friend about the power of hospitality in the face of poverty and illiteracy.

As Shelley celebrated one more Easter in east Africa two weeks ago, she emailed me that she was having trouble identifying as an American Christian, given all the bad publicity we are getting in the international press.

She wrote, "My surprising experience of welcome and belonging (at Triune) continues to inspire me that faith *can be* a unifying force where differences in the family are actually part of the glue. Our world so desperately needs more of that energy!"

Far from our city streets or Furman's green campus, Shelley is living as an Easter person. I wonder if she thinks in those terms.

What does it mean to live on the other side of the resurrection? What does it mean to live in the aftermath of Easter?

Shelley is showing us one path – going to live among a group of strangers for no other reason than to show the love of Christ. But of course there are other paths as well. There are ways we can show that same love wherever we are planted.

You know, the early church gathered the four gospel stories of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. But it also assembled the rest of the New Testament from documents about Christ's new church. *How should Christians live? What should Christian community look like? Whose authority would be accepted?*

Not surprisingly, because the church was made up of fallible humans, controversies broke out almost at once. Controversies over doctrine – was Jesus fully human or fully divine, or both?

Controversies over behavior – must Christians be circumcised? Could they eat meat sacrificed to idols? And so on.

The letters of the New Testament – many from Paul, but many from other writers, too – were attempts by early Christian leaders to answer those questions. To address those concerns.

Today, we are going to continue looking at the letter known as 1 John. It is not addressed to a specific church as so many of Paul's letters were. Instead, it seems to have been used as authoritative commentary for a wider Christian community.

If you'd like to read along, turn in your Bibles to **1 John 2: 3-11**.

3 Now by this we may be sure that we know (Jesus Christ), if we obey his commandments. ⁴Whoever says, 'I have come to know him', but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; ⁵but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: ⁶whoever says, 'I abide in him', ought to walk just as he walked.

7 Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. ⁸Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

⁹Whoever says, 'I am in the light', while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. ¹⁰Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. ¹¹But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

As I mentioned last week, a lot of confusion surrounds the authorship of these letters. As early as the third century, a bishop in Alexandria wrote that the gospel of John AND 1, 2 and 3 John were written by the same person.

To this day, many scholars believe that. The circular, repetitive nature of the writing makes me think that.

The early church also assumed that the writer connected with the gospel and the letters was the apostle John, one half of the James-and-John brother team known as the sons of Zebedee. The sons of thunder. We can't know for sure.

What we do know is this letter known as 1 John pointed out that some Christians were not behaving properly. And John was rather pointed in pointing it out.

Back in chapter 1, he wrote, **“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”** (1 John 1: 8)

And in chapter 4, he will write: **“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”** (1 John 4: 20)

And in our passage for today from chapter 2, John is equally firm. If we claim to be believers, he says, we will live like it.

“... (W)hoever says, ‘I abide in him’, ought to walk just as he walked.”

That's a pretty big order. In order to follow Jesus, we must do no less than walk as he walked, live as he lived, love as he loved.

In other words:

They will know we are Christians

by our love, by our love.

They will know we are Christians by our love.

I learned that song from the little brother of one my closest friends in high school. It was written by a Catholic priest during the 1960s.

The song had just come out when my friend's mother picked up a bunch of us girls from a camping trip. Her little brother, who was about 6, was in the car, and he sang it all the way home. I thought it was the most beautiful hymn I'd ever heard.

Last December, more than 50 years later, that "little brother" was murdered. I officiated at his service, and we used the recording of that song by Jars of Clay. Being Christian doesn't protect us from hurt or agony or the sins of this world. It does define how we respond.

They will know we are Christians by our love.

The profoundest truths are often the simplest. If we are Christians, we will act like it. Our behavior will reflect it.

Does it really matter how correct our doctrine is if we don't live as that doctrine demands?

There is a new comedy on TV called *Living Biblically*. I tried to watch an episode, but it was too awful to finish.

It was based on A. J. Jacobs' book, *The Year of Living Biblically*. For one year, Jacobs tried to follow literally all of the Bible's commandments. Not just the *Ten Commandments* and *Love thy neighbor* and *Be fruitful and multiply*. But those odder Old Testament

commandments as well: *Do not wear clothes of mixed fibers. Do not shave your beard. Stone adulterers.*

While he may have gained some insights along the way, Jacobs' thrust was on entertainment and publicity, on the book deal side of things.

What John is saying is that true Christians will follow the single *old* commandment that Jesus made new: *Love one another.*

And John is blunt: Whoever claims to love God and *doesn't* love his brother or sister *is a liar.*

So first, if we claim to be believers, we will live like it. And second, living like it carries implications for our lives in community. Living like it carries implications for how we treat others.

Maybe we don't have to move to Africa like Shelley, but we do have to treat others with dignity and respect and love. That's how they'll know we are Christians.

During Easter of 2012, *Newsweek* magazine ran a cover illustration of Jesus with long hair, a beard and a crown of thorns. But he was dressed in a plaid shirt and jacket, standing on a big-city street with taxi cabs and bright lights.

The headline read: "Forget the church: Follow Jesus."

We might be sympathetic to that idea – with all the politics and immorality that many evangelicals are turning a blind eye to. But that is not possible. We can't "forget the church" because Jesus' foremost commandment is to love one another. We cannot do that in isolation.

If we are going to live in the world, we cannot follow Jesus alone. We follow Jesus by loving each other.

Like the gospel writer John, this letter writer John speaks frequently of light and dark. Like the gospel writer John, he also repeats himself. We see that here.

“Whoever says, ‘I am in the light’, while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. ... (W)hoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.”

But **“Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling.”**

This is the “so what” of Easter. Jesus has been mocked. Jesus has been crucified. Jesus has been resurrected.

And in response, John says, we are to walk as Jesus walked.

That covers a lot of territory, to be sure. It covers eating with sinners and being touched by prostitutes.

It covers touching lepers and bleeding women.

It covers feeding the hungry and speaking to power.

It covers loving the unlovely.

It covers valuing an illiterate woman in Kenya the very same as a young educated American.

One Christmas Shelley and her colleagues posted a You Tube video of themselves singing “I Had Christmas Down in Africa” to the tune of “I Bless the Rains Down in Africa.”

It sounded a lot like the a cappella singing Shelley did here, a lot like the three Furman girls who sang for us last week.

All through the video, these young people were drumming and dancing and jumping up and down and skipping through fields wearing Santa hats. But after the song ended, the video showed them walking down a dusty African road, herding goats and cows.

They looked suspiciously as if they were walking as Jesus walked.

Amen.