

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 12, 2021

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
C: **Amen.**

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 50:4-10

The Lord God has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.
Morning by morning he awakens;
he awakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.
The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious;
I turned not backward.
I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face
from disgrace and spitting.

But the Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.
He who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who is my adversary?
Let him come near to me.
Behold, the Lord God helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

Who among you fears the Lord
and obeys the voice of his servant?
Let him who walks in darkness
and has no light
trust in the name of the Lord
and rely on his God.

2 John

The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:

Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love.

I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. And now I ask you, dear lady – not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning – that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.

The children of your elect sister greet you.

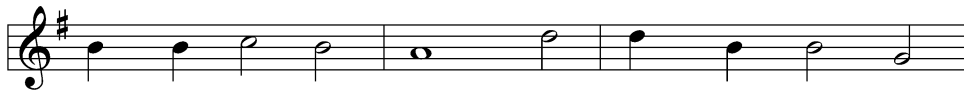
Mark 9:14-29

And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "'If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.'" Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

Hymn: *LSB 528, Oh, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing*



1	Oh,	for	a	thou - sand	tongues	to	sing	My
2	My	gra - cious	Mas - ter	and	my	God,	As -	
3	Je - sus!	The	name	that	charms	our	fears,	That
4	He	breaks	the	pow'r	of	can - celed	sin;	He



great Re - deem - er's praise, The glo - ries of my
 sist me to pro - claim, To spread through all the
 bids our sor - rows cease; 'Tis mu - sic in the
 sets the pris - 'ner free. His blood can make the



God and King, The tri - umphs of His grace!
 earth a - broad, The hon - ors of Thy name.
 sin - ner's ears, 'Tis life and health and peace.
 foul - est clean; His blood a - vails for me.

- 5 He speaks, and list'ning to His voice,
 New life the dead receive;
 The mournful, broken hearts rejoice;
 The humble poor, believe.

- 6 In Christ, your head, you then shall know,
 Shall feel your sins forgiv'n;
 Anticipate your heav'n below,
 And own that love is heav'n.

Sermon

Today we turn to a very short letter, a book of the Bible we call "2 John." It's just about tied with 3 John to be the shortest book in the entire Bible, and we heard the whole thing this morning. There's a few of these ultra-short books in the Bible, the kind that get so little attention partly because they're so hard to find when you're flipping through the pages! This entire book fits on one page -- it's a little bit like driving through Delaware or Rhode Island, if you blink you might miss it.

But this morning we are not going to miss it; one of the benefits of it being so short is that we don't have to limit ourselves to just a few verses but actually can look at the whole thing all at once. Despite its compact brevity, it was considered important enough to be included in the collection of Scripture, so there is something worth seeing here. We have five different pieces written by John the Apostle, who was one of those fisherman that Jesus called away from his boat on the Sea of Galilee with those words "I will make you fishers of men." Most familiar are the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation, but we also have these three letters 1, 2, and 3 John.

From these five books, plus the glimpses we see of him in the other Gospels, we get a pretty good picture of his life and personality. He was one of those three disciples closest to Jesus (Peter, James, and John) who had a front-row seat throughout Jesus' ministry. He was present at the Transfiguration, the crucifixion, and the empty tomb. Traditionally he's said to be the longest-lived of all the original disciples, living into the 90s AD and the only one who died a natural death instead of being martyred for the Christian faith.

In this letter, he is likely writing later in his life, perhaps fifty years or so after the Resurrection. Peter and Paul and the others have died; John is left as the elder statesman of the Christian community, the last living link who knew Jesus face to face. He is also greatly concerned for the next generations of Christians, that they know the truth about Jesus and continue to follow God in that truth when the eyewitnesses are gone. That is the focus of this brief letter: love and truth, and what those both mean in Jesus.

So who was John writing to? He addresses it to "the elect lady and her children." Some people have thought this means a specific person, a Christian woman and children that John knew. If that's

the case, then the nothing more is known about her identity. Most Christians, however, have understood this as talking about the Christian Church as a whole: the Church is called the Bride of Christ, and if there's a pronoun attached, the Church is often a "she." He also concludes the letter, "the children of your elect sister greet you." So it seems apparent that he's writing to the church of some unnamed city, with greetings from the church in his own city; the churches themselves are these elect ladies, the Bride of Christ, and her children are all the faithful Christians who gather together there.

So while John was writing to real people he knew, he is also writing to all of us because we are likewise part of the one, united Bride of Christ. What is he concerned about? Truth and love. Those are John's great, overarching themes through all his writing: truth and love, that these are the things that are absolutely indispensable for Christians. In particular, it's the truth about Jesus and love for each other.

We can see in those two things both the "what" and the "how" of being a Christian. The "what" is important: what you believe, knowing what is true about God and Jesus. There are many people who don't agree: in the last generation or two, it's been popular to say that all the various human religions are just different paths to one transcendent spiritual truth. The illustration is that what we call God is the peak of a mountain, and the different religions are various paths and routes up to that summit; you can pick one path or another, but they get there in the end. The Bible disagrees: Jesus says "I am the way, the truth, and the life, and no one gets to the Father except through me."

In the 1st Century, the apostle John was also dealing with people who were saying false things about God. Some denied, as he says here, "the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh." This could refer to some who did not believe Jesus was actually God incarnate, true God taking on humanity. Some early Christian writers thought this referred to denying the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. It could refer to a large range of false teachings, but the result is clear: a person who does not confess the truth about Jesus is antichrist, literally "against Christ." This is definitely not like the Left Behind books or that kind of picture of a single supervillain Antichrist; anyone who twists and denies the truth is anti-(against) Christ. Faith is more than simply having the facts right, but what we believe does matter; we repeat it every week with the creeds of the Church, the Nicene or Apostles' creeds. John warns, if you do not abide in the teaching of Christ, you do not have God. The only way to the Father is through the Son.

Our Lutheran tradition has usually been highly concerned with being correct. One of my seminary professors once commented that if each denomination or tradition was a different organ within the one Body of Christ, we Lutherans would probably be something like the kidneys because our strength is filtering out impurities. But being faithful to the reality revealed to us in Scripture is important. What you believe does matter. It matters enough that John warns his hearers to not extend hospitality or fellowship to false teachers who undermine the Gospel.

But though the "what" matters, the "how" does too. I've also run into more than enough people who might say the correct thing, but they said it in a way so obnoxious or arrogant or rudely that the message was lost. The Christian message can be offensive to people -- after all, part of proclaiming repentance and salvation means coming to grips with the fact that we're all really bad people, we're all lost and condemned sinners. The implication of the Gospel is always there that you're not okay how you are, and you need forgiveness and salvation. But we have to make sure that if people are offended, it's the message and not the messenger.

And so, the other main point and emphasis is love. John writes about the commandment given to Christians: simply to love one another. Walk with one another in true brotherly love. This is what Jesus said that night of the Last Supper: "I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. By this everyone will know that you are my

disciples, if you love one another.” Love each other the way that Jesus loves us, selflessly and sacrificially, the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13 that is humble and patient and kind. This is love that blesses those who persecute it, that loves its enemies and turns the other cheek, that seeks only peace and gives no thought to revenge. By this kind of love, everyone will know that you are followers of Jesus.

Is that what Christians are known for in our country? Jesus did not say “They will know you by your ability to score political points or get laws passed or win debates.” Jesus did not say “They will know you because you shared hilarious Facebook posts that put down ‘the other side.’” Jesus said, “They will know you are my disciples when you love one another the way that I have loved you.” I think Jesus would be thoroughly unimpressed by American Christianity, both on the liberal side and the conservative side. Some have compassion but reject the truth; others speak the truth but do it without love. Neither path is in accordance with the way of Jesus.

There’s a kind of symbiotic relationship here: the truth about ourselves and our Savior leads us to love each other, and true Christian love strengthens our faith and our witness to that truth. True Christ-like love comes only from knowing Christ; love comes from faith, and faith grows and matures through being acted out in love. Each builds the other, and if one is absent the other will not survive forever. Both are united in the person of Jesus: he is the Truth incarnate, and he is the love of God incarnate.

In our reading from Isaiah, we heard this: “Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.” The world is full of darkness, but into this darkness the light of Christ shines. It shines into us in knowing the truth about God and being brought back to Him through Jesus. And it shines through us into the world by imitating the love that Jesus showed. Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? The one who walks in both truth and in love. May our Lord strengthen us for this and forgive us when we stumble, that we always rejoice to walk in the truth of God’s love. Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son, in truth and love.

Lord’s Prayer

**Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven;
give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

P: Lord Jesus Christ, our support and defense in every need, continue to preserve Your Church in safety, govern her by Your goodness, and bless her with Your peace; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C: Amen.

All: I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: **Thanks be to God!**

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: **Amen.**