

1 John 5:1-6 “Concerning Love”

We’re winding down our Easter series on encountering the Risen Christ and how that shapes how we “do church.” Maybe you’ve noticed that every week, the sermon titles start out with, “Concerning.” So far this season we’ve covered fellowship, partnerships, discipleship and worship. This week, we’re considering love. Specifically how controversial love can be. Controversial? Yeah, I think it’s controversial because we tend to think of love as something that everyone is in favour of. Think of all the songs that have been written about the subject. “All You Need is Love.” “The Power of Love.” “Love Makes the World Go Around.” Of course there’s also “Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places” and “Love Hurts,” but still ... the assumption is it’s something worthy to pursue which makes it seem like *everyone* believes in love!

Okay, so then if that’s the case, why does Jesus feel the need to *command* his followers to love? Back in the Gospel of John, chapter 15, verse 17 Jesus says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another.” How can love be an order, or a law? Wouldn’t that just defeat the purpose? And in this passage from 1 John, the writer suggests that love is fundamental to *conquering the world*! It’s bad enough when it seems like we treat love like a marketing plan, but this sounds like a military campaign! “Hit your enemies over the head with love and faith! That’ll win the day! I love you!” (SMACK!)

So let’s take this passage and work backwards. First, let’s figure out what the writer means by “the world.” First of all, the term “the world” is used in two different ways. Sometimes “the world” means “the Earth” as in the physical planet with mountains, rivers, oceans, animals, and people. When we use the word this way, it’s usually in the positive. As in, “God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son.” Sometimes, though, we use the term to compare one state of reality to another. Like when our vacation is coming to an end we’ll say, “Well, time to go back to the *real world*,” as if the “real world” is something

less attractive or less loved than where we've been for the last week. It's the same way with the word "flesh." On one hand, the Bible says it's a good thing. "You are flesh of my flesh, and bone of my bones." But it's also something that's at war with the spirit and lures us into sin. Same word, but double meaning depending on the context.

So "the world," in this context, is a complex network of powers and structures that stand in opposition to God. The world is a system of political powers, cultural powers, commercial powers, religious powers, values systems, and social structures. Although they're never in perfect harmony with one another, these powers cooperate to define or control people's lives. And yes, I know this sound like I'm one of those whacky conspiracy theorists, but think of it this way: The "commercial" powers of this world cooperate to lead us to believe that we're "out of touch" if we don't buy the right products or live the right lifestyle or drive the right car or have the right job or invest in the right stocks. But the minute someone stands in *opposition* to those "commercial" powers? Those powers will fight back *fiercely*. And the weird thing is that it's not just the "privileged elites" who *created* this system or the ones who benefit from being part of the system who'll fight back. Sometimes even the losers in a system like this will defend it just as fiercely, especially if they think they're going to lose something. That's why the system uses fear to maintain support for itself.

Folks on the losing end might say, "Yeah, this system isn't perfect, and sure, it may seem like there's too many losers. But what's the alternative? The alternative is too horrible to even contemplate! Because if you don't go along with the system, you'll have chaos, anarchy, crime, social disintegration, epidemics, terrorism and war!" We're told that "the system" is the *only thing* that can hold things together. So don't rock the boat! Even if things are bad for you right now, they'd be a whole lot worse if "the system" ever broke down. So you better do your part to defend it, maintain it, and advance it. Put your nose to the grindstone. Work those extra hours. Buy all that stuff that never really satisfies but keeps the economy growing. Protect what's

yours. Maintain law and order. Trust that the government knows best. Drown out the questions about whether it's really all worth it. Don't listen to those voices who say this is all killing us. Because the only thing that's worse than this is the terrifying chaos that will come flooding in if we let our guard down and "the world" collapses. And so to keep that from happening, we better silence anyone who might undermine the current world order. That's the "world" that the writer of 1 John is talking about. Not the third rock from the sun world, but the world *order*.

Which is interesting because Jesus was executed because the powers of the world order in his day conspired to silence him. Why? Because Jesus was out proclaiming a *new* world order. An alternative system. A world order of love. And the problem wasn't just Jesus. The ones who followed Jesus started to catch this vision too. They started imagining a different world. And Jesus' message wasn't, "Oh, just be nice and loving but follow the rules of the current system" either. If that was the case, he wouldn't have been a threat to anyone. The powers of the world would have just dismissed him and he wouldn't have ended up on the cross.

The world ... that is the present system ... as it exists then and now does not reject love. Why? Because it values love as a commodity in a system of exchange. Love becomes the reward for supporting the current system. Advertisers tell us this all the time! It's the ones who succeed in the system ... the ones who profit and spend and work to keep up with the Jones' ... who work towards a desirable positions on the social ladder ... they're the ones who will find love. Heck, they'll be *rewarded* with love. But those who fail to find love? Well obviously it's their own fault. The rules of the current world order say, "Work harder for the system, and the world will reward you with love."

But the world order that Jesus is proposing derails that sort of thinking. The reign of God rejects the "commodification" of love. The reign of God, instead, makes love the fuel for this new world order. Instead of

love being a scarce commodity that has to be earned, love is the super-abundant unlimited force that *powers* the new world order. Instead of trying so hard to *be loveable*, we start out with the premise that we are *already loved* -- overwhelmingly, unconditionally and limitlessly! And when you start seeing love as a limitless force rather than a scarce commodity, you become a threat to the old system. *That's* how we get to this notion that love can conquer the world. Love can help us break free from the clutches of the *old* world order. When we know that we're secure in a love that we don't have to earn, then we can freely opt out of the old system, and begin living in God's reign.

So when Jesus speaks of love as a commandment, and when the writer of 1 John talks about love as a conquering force, they're contrasting the new world order to the old world order's toxic, outdated system. The one that's governed by laws that keep everyone in their place in order to keep the system functioning. Jesus is calling us to abandon that old system with all its' multitude of laws to keep the system going and to embrace the new world order which has *one* law: The law of *love*.

But I don't think this kind of love comes easily or naturally, which is why I think Jesus had to frame it as a command. We get really self-protective when we're told to love our enemies. We get defensive when we're called to love people who the system requires us to despise. The system needs us to fear and despise outsiders and losers who don't fall into the roles that the system assigned them. We're required to dismiss and ignore folks who have fallen through the cracks. We're required to see *all of them* as lazy free-loaders who *could* work if they *really* wanted to, but choose not to. So to suggest that we love and serve "those" people is subversive. And to make that sort of love a command or a law is absolutely treasonous as far as the old world order is concerned.

Even in a community of faith like ours, love doesn't always come easily or naturally. Whether we like to admit it or not, a lot of our values and expectations in the church are shaped by the "old world order." Our

default setting is to show most of our love only to those who've earned it. If they value what we value and support what we support, great! If not ... well ... tough luck. Loving those whose outlook seem to threaten the way *we* want things to be is much more of an effort. Which is funny because that doesn't seem to reconcile with verse 3 where the writer says, "God's commandments are not burdensome." But, again we're dealing with a contrast here. Compared to the overwhelming mountain of regulation and control that the old system offers, God's command to love is as free and light as a feather. And yet those old ways feel familiar and secure, so the change doesn't come easily. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know, right?

That's why it's so important that we gather here together for Sunday worship. Yes, last week I said that we can and should worship anywhere, but that doesn't mean I'm letting you off the hook about coming to this place at this time. Because when we do, it gives us an opportunity to practice and rehearse the sort of love that Jesus commands us to practice. It gives us the opportunity to rewrite our operating scripts. In a little while, when we pray the Lord's prayer together, we'll pray that God's kingdom might come, and that God's will would be done. Which, if you think about it, is a way of praying that the old world might pass away and that the new world will come. And after that we'll gather around the table to be nourished with the bread of life and cup of love.

The new world order is here, and this is our commandment ... our law: "Love one another as Jesus has loved us."