

January 6, 2018

Lesson 6: Holding Fast to God's Love

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5; 2 John 4-11

Context:

As we begin our first Sunday in a new year, we continue with a focus on how we love God. There are two texts in today's lesson focusing on ways in which we can hold fast to God's love. Both texts come from the New Testament and illustrate how early Christians sought to understand how to embrace their new identity in Christ and respond to others in a genuinely Christian manner.

The first scripture passage comes from Paul's letter to Thessalonians. This passage comes from the last chapter of the book. In chapters one and two the author has raged against those who afflict believers and their rebellion against God in following the powers of evil and lawlessness.¹ While the closing chapter certainly reflects some of these themes of warning the people against these individuals doing evil deeds, the closing tone also gives the people something uplifting and proactive. The congregation is to pray for the preachers.

The prayer for them is to spread the message, but to also be rescued from those people who will not respond with faith. The translation of these "faithless" people is not to mean they are to be rescued from unbelieving people, but from those who intend to hurt them such as the "wicked and evil people" referenced in the previous chapters. The writer goes on to remind the people that they will be guided and protected by the Lord who will be with them. The translation of the "evil one" does not necessarily imply Satan, but could also be translated as the word "evil."² The people are to keep doing what they are told to do and to express God's love even in the face of adversity.

The second reading comes from another small book in the New Testament. This letter is attributed to John, but not John, the son of Zebedee. Scholars attribute authorship to Elder John, known in the early church and distinguished by Papias (early second century) and Eusebius (early fourth century) as they discussed the differences between the Apostle John and the Elder John.³ Like the other letters attributed to John, this short letter focuses on truth and light.

The verses here refer to some of the issues the church face in their community. They are reminded of Jesus's command to live in love. The author reminds them not to follow the docetics who advocating that Jesus was not both human and divine. This heresy threatens the early church as it makes Jesus a phantom, someone who was not real and whose actions had no root. The author encourages them to have nothing to do with

¹ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "First and Second Thessalonians," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1998), 124.

² *Ibid.*, 126.

³ D. Moody Smith, "First, Second, and Third John," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1991), 139.

these people and not to extend radical hospitality to them.⁴ There is a warning against those who do not act or act in love. They are a threat to the community of faith and are not to be tolerated.

Application

It might seem in reading these passages that we wonder about the paradox of the word “love.” Especially after reading second John, one might ask how you can talk about love when there is specific instruction to shun someone from the community because of a teaching or belief. It does not sound inclusive or in line with the concept of radical hospitality that is a buzzword in modern Christianity.

Yet it reminds us that love is rarely easy. Yes, we enjoy the warm, sappy moments that come with love. Everyone enjoys a good wedding where everything looks perfect from the decorations at the reception venue down to the veil that covers a bride. However, we know that there are things that come after the wedding that are not seen. There is dealing with communication in marriage and talking about the hard issues like money and childrearing. That is where love can be hard and even difficult.

In the church today we sometimes struggle with the concept of tough love. We enjoy it when everything looks good and when everything on the surface appears put together. But what I have also noted about church life and even family life is that sometimes it is not that way and there are things brewing beneath the surface. There are family members who control the dynamics and everyone acquiesces to them to avoid conflict or drama. There are church members who like holding power and lash out when they don't get their way at fellow laity or clergy. There is a failure of nerve in which people are reluctant to call them out or hold them accountable for their behavior. The excuse becomes it is not the “polite” thing to do or the Christ-like behavior we encourage in the church.

Passages like these remind us though that we are called to a different standard. Jesus calls us to love one another, which requires discipline and accountability. Whenever we allow people to act in ways that are harmful or parasitic to the family or the church, then we are not truly loving them. We are enabling them and over functioning in order to avoid the inevitable conflict that may be brewing. At times in order to love we must do the hard thing and allow the cards to fall where they will fall.

As we begin a new year, we are given an opportunity to get on a right foot in our lives and our relationships. In starting the new year, may we be reminded to be in relationships with love as our guide. Hopefully this love will carry some of the sappier things we enjoy like planning for the future and enjoying time with one another. Yet hopefully this love will also spur us to see the bigger picture of things going on and to examine if our relationships are healthy. Do we enable inappropriate behaviors? Do we tolerate things that harm others because we are afraid of the anger of one party? Do we encourage one another to grow in love and to watch how we treat others? The start to this year may include doing an examination as we seek to grow in love of God and of others.

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⁴ Ibid., 146.

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