

A Winning Faith

1 John 5:1-6
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First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

Laurie Capps, writing in the Washington Post, shares a story about her 8-year-old daughter Grace. Laurie often hears Grace in her room whispering to herself after she's been put to bed. Sometimes she hears Grace's footsteps at night, scurrying around the house, retrieving a doll or stuffed animal.

One day Grace was whispering and Laurie went in and asked her what she was doing. "I'm playing hide-and-seek with God...."

Laurie laughed and said, "Gracie, honey, don't you think ... God can find you anywhere you hide?" Gracie just rolled her eyes and said, "Mom, I'm looking for God."¹

When it comes to playing hide-and-seek, I think we can all agree that Gracie is a winner. Even at age 8, she knows that seeking after God is so much better than sitting around thinking God needs to find us, to come to us.

It's all about how you orient your life, who you look for at the center of your life.

It's easy to sit here in worship and say that God is at the center of your life. The hard part is keeping God there when you step out of the sanctuary. And yet, that's where we need God most – when we're out in the world, out in the community, out with our families, even out in the Parlour after worship.

This morning's New Testament lesson from First John is all about orienting our lives in such a way that we get the most love and joy one could possibly have in this world.

First John was written to a community of believers who were struggling to understand why faith in Jesus is so central to love and joy. Some believed the best life was achieved by freeing themselves from worldly entanglements and the constraints of bodily existence. For them, it was all about spiritual life overcoming physical existence.

They looked at self-discipline as the highest ideal, rather than entrusting their lives to faith in Christ. For them, Jesus was an archetype or model of what a life of faith was all about, which of course, he is. And yet, he is so much more.

There are people today who live by self-discipline, seeking a better life through the routines they establish and maintain. And there's nothing wrong with that. Self-discipline is important. It's just not most important. It doesn't come first for those who want the most love and joy life has to offer.

¹ Capps, Laurie. "Autobiography as haiku." The Washington Post. January 5, 2003, F1.

Being Christ-like in our words and actions, our choices and habits takes more than self-discipline. It takes faith.

Take for instance, the faith of Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa had such faith that her actions, her lifestyle defied logic. It was only by faith that she could live based on the following principles:

“People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered,” she said; “forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; be kind anyway.”

“If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies; succeed anyway. If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you; be honest and frank anyway.”

“What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; build anyway. If you find eternity and happiness, they may be jealous; be happy anyway.”

“The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway. Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; give the world the best you’ve got anyway.”

“You see,” said Mother Teresa, “in the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.”

The one who is between you and God – at the center of your life - always, always, always has to be Jesus, and certainly not the world. We can’t love God the Father without loving Jesus the Son. Or as First John says, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.”

It is Jesus who is at the center of a godly life. Having Jesus at the center of your life means relying on Jesus in all things. Relying on Jesus in all things means loving God more than you love the world. And loving God more than you love the world means trusting in the Lord and obeying God’s commandments.

First John says, “... The love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world.”

What are the things that are born of God, the things that conquer the world? Clearly love, right? Grace and mercy; self-sacrifice; divine power; ultimate truth; joy, hope and unity.

And what are the things that are born of this world? Hate; stubbornness, vengeance and greed; manipulation, lies and deception; despair and hopelessness; divisiveness and division. There are people in this world – far too many people in this world – who rely on such ungodly things to get ahead, thinking that this will be a winning strategy, bringing them love and joy.

Even for us – for you and for me – such ungodly ways creep in far too often. I mean, ask yourself – what tends to be more present in your life right now – grace and mercy or anger and stubbornness; self-sacrifice and giving or vengeance and greed; the God’s honest truth or lies and deception; joy, hope and unity or despair, division and fighting with others?

We think we can win by asserting ourselves, and First John is telling us we can only win by asserting Christ, by putting our faith above all else, by having Jesus at the center of our lives.

C.S. Lewis – in his theological masterpiece “Mere Christianity” – says “...the real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals.

And the first job each morning,” says Lewis,” consists simply in shoving them all back; ... listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.”²

Where, for you, does that inner voice come from? Are you trying to drown out the world by tuning in to your spiritual side, calling on your better angels? Sadly, drowning out the world doesn’t work.

No, what we really need is to have Jesus at the center of our lives, Jesus who overcame the world, by coming to us in bodily form, to show us that love is stronger than hate; grace and mercy are more noble than stubbornness and vengeance; self-sacrifice is more rewarding than greed; divine truth always wins over lies and deception; and that joy, hope and unity overcome any sense of despair, bringing true and lasting peace amid the fiercest fighting and the most entrenched divisions.

So, make it your life’s mission to start each day with Jesus at the center of your life, pushing out all that is ungodly. And then go through that day knowing it is only love, grace and mercy, selflessness and truth that make possible true joy of spirit, peace of heart, and unity with others.

When it comes to overcoming life’s struggles and rising up from life’s disappointments ours is a winning faith, a faith that day-in and day-out conquers the world. Amen.

² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Zondervan, 1952), 198.

PASTORAL PRAYER

How easy it is for us to run away from you, O God, and run toward all of the things in our lives we think we need to do.

In this time of prayer, turn our minds away from thinking to just being. Let us breathe in the calmness of your presence and breathe out the chattering in our minds. Breathe in quietude; breathe out trivia. Breathe in peacefulness. Breathe out the minutiae that clamors for our attention.

In the stillness of your certain presence, let us sit and breathe deeply of the peace that is ours through the breath of the Holy Spirit.

This is always ours, always available: We have only to be still and make room for God.

In the stillness of this moment, Lord, we pray for those who need your care and compassion, your strength and provision, your guidance and wisdom. We pray for those in need of your healing touch. We pray all this in faith, as we raise our eyes to heaven and our voices in song, praying the prayer that you taught us, saying:

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 debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.