

1 John 2:7-11, 18-25; 4:18-19

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. Yet 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. Whoever says, "I am the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. But 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.

Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they have made it plain that none of them belongs to us.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us.

Tuesdays are my sermon-writing days, and Monday we had that big storm which cut power to many lowans, including us, blew a tree onto our house, and apparently killed the internet fairy. So on Tuesday morning I needed to write a sermon the old-fashioned way, with no internet searches or podcasts, and definitely without the online lectionary I rely on. In other words, I had to select my own scripture reading, I had no idea what was next in the narrative lectionary and no way of finding out. So I thought I'd turn to the early church and see if their issues had anything to say to us and our issues.

The Johannine letters are so called because they seem to be written by someone from the same community that generated the gospel of John. They are writings directly addressed to worshiping congregations. Their fundamental proclamation is that God is love, and that's the essence of what drives us and what our orientation should be. 1 John 4:7 is the famous passage, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." But all three letters are also concerned about "false teachings,"

and 1 John toggles in a troubling way between calling people back to first principles (love) and demonizing the “false teachers.” Our reading began with a reminder that to love is to live in the light, and to hate “another believer” is to walk in the darkness. But a few verses later the author rips into these false teachers, saying, “As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.” Who is this antichrist, I hear you ask? It’s not someone with a tail and pitchfork, eating small children and sending plagues throughout the land. It’s other Christians who think that Jesus was not really a human being, and therefore didn’t die on the cross, *because* God is transcendent and all-powerful and could not possibly, embodied in Jesus, suffer. Their starting place is the power and glory of God, and from that they deduce that Jesus’ human experiences were just facsimiles, meant to deceive ordinary people.

This is not totally wacky. You can understand how they arrived at that conclusion. It really originates with reverence, profound respect for the Divine. It didn’t win the day; it was pretty much stamped out at the Council of Nicaea, but if it had gone the other direction we’d all be teaching our children that Jesus was a hologram. This theological position was taken, I’m saying, in good faith, even though I’m convinced it’s incorrect.

But the author of 1 John calls these Christians “the antichrist.” He thinks that the humanness of Jesus is so important that anyone who denies it falls outside the mandate to love. We don’t have to love those people; in fact, we should repudiate them entirely. And I can only think that the vehemence of this teaching is a strategy to hold the community together, this tiny, fragile, new church, and keep it from flinging off bits of itself by centripetal force as wildly different ideas gain currency with various members.

People need to stop doing that. People need to stop demonizing their opponents in

order to hold institutions together, because it actually just undermines us all. It especially undermines those of us who call ourselves Christian.

Recently, after two months of demonstrations and several years of polite pressure, Gov. Reynolds signed an executive order allowing ex-felons to vote. It was not a typical thing for a Republican to do, but Reynolds, as a recovering alcoholic, has a strong personal conviction that everybody deserves a second chance. That belief is clearly heartfelt, and it sure didn't win her any friends on her side of the aisle. But for the order-signing ceremony, she invited Rep. Ako Abdul Samad, a representative of the ACLU, and a representative of the NAACP—all polite older people who go through the accepted channels to achieve their goals. She did not invite any of the Black Lives Matter activists—mostly young people who had made a lot of noise and commotion in the streets, and whose two months of protest finally got Reynolds over the hump to sign this order. It was a deliberate snub. She was saying, "I don't have to recognize you or give you any credit for what I'm doing, and I'm not going to because you were not civil."

Imagine for a minute if she had invited Matthew Bruce or another BLM leader. They would have masked up and stood with Betty Andrews and Ako and applauded for the cameras, and Reynolds would have looked gracious and stateswomanlike, rising above her personal animus. It would have set a great example of how politicians can be large people, not petty and vindictive, and how they can show respect for adversaries. She didn't do that. She didn't make that symbolic gesture of respect, and judging from what I saw on Twitter, she didn't build the bridges toward those adversaries that need to be built.

Take another thing that happened recently. Officer Paul Parizek went to buy doughnuts at Dunkin Donuts, and the young, poor staffperson refused him service. He reported the snub

to the press as well as the management, and got airtime on the news expressing his righteous indignation. Now, that snub did not take place in a vacuum, and I don't think I have to explain the context to everybody. The counter staff was legally in the wrong, but it's also the case that Paul Parizek holds a position of significant authority, and has the ability to get media exposure to complain about the discourtesy he'd suffered from a poor person who resents the police. He probably thinks of himself as a good and reasonable person, and he was humiliated and hurt to be refused service. But imagine for a second that, recognizing the context, he had said to her, "I think you've had bad experiences with police, and I wish that weren't the case. Please know that I'm trying to do policing right, but I take your disagreement seriously." I personally think Paul Parizek hasn't done all the homework he should about racism and policing, but that's beside the point. He could have just said those simple words, not insisted on the doughnuts, and showed himself to be a bigger person. He already has more power than the counter person; he doesn't have to win this round. He lashed out because he was hurt and humiliated.

What I'm trying to get at is that it is standard procedure for people to acknowledge that God is love and love is our first principle, and then start excluding all the beloved children of God who make our lives difficult or show us points of view we don't like. It is done out of hurt and fear, fear that we will lose our leverage or position. It is done simply for revenge, because the person has the power to do it.

I do not think that happens to be a problem for our church members, honestly, though probably some of us sometimes indulge our hurt feelings when we could rise above them. I wouldn't know about that, myself. But it is a problem in our wider society, and the reason I brought it up is that we actually do have some practice at trying to manage our hurt and anger

and love our enemies. I think loving our enemies, or loving the unlovable, is a part of the Christian life that this group consciously works at. So the exhortation for you and me, my friends, is to figure out how to make the gracious option, the larger-person option, the respectful option, one that is recognized *as* an option in our society. I don't think people are even aware anymore that there's another way to operate. I didn't hear *anybody* talking about Kim Reynolds' missed opportunity to reach out the BLM, or *anybody* suggesting that Officer Parizek could have removed some of the fuel for resentment that simmers in young, poor people. Sometimes people who are right simply want to rest in their rightness—but this wounded society needs not just adjudication of rightness, but also graciousness and respect. We need to point that out, as well as model it. We need to make that option visible, and discuss publicly how healing it would be if people extended a little love to their enemies instead of calling them the antichrist.

The early Johannine community probably had realistic fears that their community and their strength would dissolve if competing interests gained traction. I'd like to say that if they'd trusted God enough they wouldn't have fallen for scaremongering, but that's easy to say 19 centuries later. Still, it really is better to lose fighting for the winning side than to win fighting for the losing side, if you follow me. It's better to make our rule "Love all of them" and sometimes kick ourselves in the shin doing so than to make our rule "Love the good ones" and thereby undermine the whole principle that gives us life and light. In all appropriate humility, we need to be witnesses to the option of graciousness, because nobody else is doing it and it's kind of our job.

Let us pray: God, just ordinary life involves risks and decisions, and sometimes we go on

autopilot rather than sort it out one by one. Let our autopilot always be guided by love. And help us to see, with humility but with faith in you, how we can witness to the trustworthiness of love's guidance. Amen.