

I was pretty excited when I read this week's lection, because I hardly ever get to preach on the antichrist. You don't see a lot about the antichrist until you get to those little short letters at the end of the New Testament, the letters that were written long after the gospels and long after Paul, when the churches were established but orthodoxy was not. The letters of John are written early in the second century, when Christianity was big enough to contain a wide variety of interpretations, but not old enough to have any centralized authority that would set parameters on those interpretations. So you get this concern with false prophets and false spirits that you see in today's reading, and the rare sighting of the antichrist.

I went straight to Google images to get a good picture of the antichrist. The first, and most repeated, image, is Luca Signorelli's depiction of what looks like the Temptation of Christ, a devilish figure whispering into the ear of a Christ-like figure. But at the end of the top row of Google's images is a photo of Barack Obama, and at the end of the second row of images is a photo of Donald Trump. Scrolling down, amid the movie monsters and the video game villains, you find Queen Elizabeth II and Pope Francis. So that was all too confusing, and I decided to abandon the search for a really accurate picture of the antichrist.

Actually, the writer of 1 John is not talking about an apocalyptic figure who seeks to nullify the redemption that Christ brings. It's more mundane than that; he's talking about a form of the gospel that was circulating in his time, that was "against" Christ because it offered a disembodied, solely spiritual concept of Christ. This was a form of what came to be called Docetism, the idea that God would be sullied and

degraded by actually having human form, so Jesus must not really have been embodied. Docetists taught that he merely appeared to be human, but was a spirit, and did not suffer and die on the cross. It was an argument made in good faith; it wasn't intended diabolically. But the member of the Johannine community who writes this letter labels it "antichrist" because they see it as antithetical to the conviction that God so fully cherishes human beings that God became one of us. "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come *in the flesh* is from God." For this writer, life is not a dreary and necessary prelude to the real life that comes when we are free of our bodies, after death. Life right now takes place in the realm of God; God is active among us, in our bodies, in our very human experiences.

Much of American Christianity treats Jesus as a "get out of hell free" card. The focus is on the afterlife, and the redemptive function of the Resurrection to rescue us from the hell we so richly deserve. In fact, somewhere I even saw a Nativity display that referred to the baby in the manger as "born to die," as if the life and ministry of Jesus were just filler. But the historical evidence suggests that while Jesus knew he *might* be executed, he wasn't planning on it and he certainly wasn't hoping for it. The crucifixion was a catastrophe for his movement, and a huge embarrassment even after the resurrection subverted his execution.

So this letter underlines the importance of Jesus' embodiment and our own human lives now. It was his human life that illustrated the kingdom of God—the healing of injuries, the breaking down of barriers, the refusal to dehumanize others, the insistence that economic injustice be noticed and reversed. And Jesus' human life and ministry was not about ending mortality—even Lazarus presumably died

again eventually. Jesus' ministry was about ending isolation. Certainly life requires that we eat and be sheltered and receive healing care. But a step above that on Maslow's hierarchy [okay, not sure how many steps really] is friendship, companionship, kindred spirits. What threatens our lives, often, is isolation. In fact, that's even true on the material level. Gustavo Gutierrez famously said, "So you say you love the poor? Name them." He was pointing out that the plight of the poor goes unnoticed because of social isolation—because their struggles take place in private, and they have no allies. M.T. Davila, a professor of Christian ethics at Andover Newton Seminary in Massachusetts, tells about an upper-middle-class congregation that was led into organizing and advocacy *through* a personal relationship.

[They] had not considered public witness and activism until they lost track of one of the refugee families they had housed as part of a hospitality network. The women in the church who had befriended the mother and children soon became concerned about the possibility that this family was being trafficked, detained, or separated. They were moved to organize not so much on behalf of refugees in general, but because of a specific family whom they had befriended, and through whom the plight of refugee families everywhere became a very real summons on their Christian life.

So you love the poor? Name them. What Jesus' life modeled, and what we are about, is replacing isolation with relationship, a very embodied practice.

But isolation is destructive to those with resources, too. The director of my parents' retirement community told my mother that the biggest reason to move there was to make socializing easier, to prevent being shut in and forgotten. *We all* need connections. In fact, I've had a bookmark for quite a while at the website of a California network called Linkages Community, where people can register to offer

or ask for skill-sharing. Karen helps retiree Joan plant a garden, and receives Community Hours. Karen uses her hours to take guitar lessons from John, who just moved to the area. John uses his hours to get a ride to the airport from Sharon. Terry offers technology help and earns hours teaching Sharon how to use her new tablet. Who can join? Individuals, organizations, and *health systems*. Because being connected to others keeps us healthy. And an essential part of our ministry as followers of Jesus must be to foster connections.

Ron has talked about his late neighbor Esther, of whom he was so fond that it came as a surprise to me when he mentioned that she also held bigoted opinions. It's rare that we are able to hold dear someone whose beliefs are abhorrent to ours, but it's what Jesus did. I treasure the story that June tells about the Jehovah's Witness who's been coming to her door for so many years that they both already know there will be no conversion, but they still have a friendly conversation every time. That's what Jesus did, too. Most of our relationships are not so counter-intuitive, and there's no reason to surround yourself with people who make you crazy. But more and more I think we are called to foster connectedness among people, to bring human, embodied warmth to everyday lives. Again, M.T. Davila speaks to this eloquently, and I will close with her words:

Communities that are able to turn their practices of hospitality into organizing have cultivated the art of story-telling and relationship-building. They have leaders, both clergy and laity, who carefully walk with them the hard road of what it means to be friends with the poor who are perennially battered by political, economic, social, cultural, and religious forces of oppression and exclusion. In getting to know the names of refugees, the unhoused, persons with addiction, transgendered persons, battered women, black and brown persons, and others we imitate the Christ that knows us deeply, and calls each one of us by name as the Holy takes on the deepest poverty of our humanity in the most radical act of transformative advocacy.

<https://dailytheology.org/2017/05/03/to-know-what-christian-activism-looks-like-make-a-friend/>

Let us pray:

Lover of our whole selves, we thank you for showing us that our ordinary world is alight with divinity. We ask for rich connections for ourselves, that we may become even more fully human. And we ask that we might carry on what Jesus did, knitting individuals into networks of friendship or at least guarded appreciation, so that our lives here and now are as abundant as they are eternally. Amen.