

November 1, 2020

Nutana Park Mennonite Church

1st John 2:1-6; 4:7-12

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with our God, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Now by this we may be sure that we know Jesus, if we obey his commandments. Whoever says, 'I have come to know him', but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, 'I abide in him', ought to walk just as he walked.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Children's Time

Simon Says: why do we sometimes imitate Simon rather than follow his verbal instruction??? We tend to imitate that which we observe.

Benediction

We conclude this service with a blessing offered by St. Patrick in the 5th Century:

Christ be with us; Christ within us; Christ behind us; Christ before us;
Christ beside us; Christ to win us; Christ to comfort and restore us;

Christ beneath us, Christ above us, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger;
Christ in hearts of all that love us; Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Go in peace to love and serve God and our neighbours. AMEN

Learning to Walk

Early Christian theologian and pastor Tertullian (155-240 C.E. approximate) is quoted as saying, "Christians are made, not born".¹ This is a helpful frame of reference as we consider our dual themes today of Child Dedication and All Saints Day. If we agree with Tertullian's statement, as most Anabaptists would, our focus turns to those things which shape people into Christians, some of whom may even become saints with a little "s" or big "S".

In the case of Tertullian, he and the other bishops of North Africa were not opposed to discussion of faith. They did, after all, encourage theological conversation among those preparing for baptism.² Tertullian's primary contention was, however, that we teach our trust in the way of Jesus most effectively through our actions and the liturgy. "As he puts it on the last page of his *Apology*, 'Christians teach through deeds'".³ This is not to say theology wasn't important. A central part of Christian theology, we must understand though, is that Christians teach through deeds. When we walk as he walked, we teach.

It was the compelling lives of ordinary Christians (generous, respectful, compassionate people) inspired by God's Spirit which brought the "obscure, marginal Jesus movement" to become "the dominant religious force in the western world"⁴. Children and adults learned to be Christian by first observing and then participating in the religious activities which undergirded Christian behavior. These religious activities were none other than praying together; listening to bible stories or the words of spiritual leaders together; eating together; burying the neglected dead together; reciting the Lord's Prayer regularly. I am not sure children and adults learning to be Christian these days are any different.

In this respect I am convinced that parents are the central players of our children's religious education in a home striving to walk as Jesus walked. Children watch their mothers and fathers and grand-parents. In due course they begin imitating their mothers and fathers and grand-parents. Granted, every person at some point will make a conscious decision on their personal values and

¹ Tertullian, *Apology* 18.4; quoted from Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), p. 59.

² Ibid, 181.

³ Ibid, 56.

⁴ The sub title of Rodney Stark's, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a few Centuries*, (San Francisco, Princeton University Press in conjunction with Harper Collins, 1997).

spiritual constructs. The home, though, is a primary venue for the formation of values and spiritual attitudes.⁵

How we live our lives does make a difference! The kind word we offer a stranger; the relationships we have with neighbours and how we speak about them; volunteerism; advocacy; the conversations we have around the breakfast or supper table—children observe the ways in which we live. Our children are watching us. They, and the outside world, learn about us from what we do as much as from what we say; likely more. We ought to walk as he walked. There is power in walking as he walked—formative power and transformative power.

Several stories came to mind as I considered these things. The first of these comes from the introduction to Craig and Marc Kielburger's book *The World Needs Your Kid*. I offer this story knowing that the "We" organization has been under political and judicial duress these days. I am not a politician or a judge, but if I understand 1st John and the Gospels correctly, well meaning people screw up. Does that diminish their contributions to society? I am not sure. That is a worthy topic for conversation, not sermonizing. Here is a story they share:

Witness a scene from our childhood: One December day, just before Christmas, Mom was heading downtown to do some last-minute shopping. She invited us to tag along. We kids from the suburbs were blown away by the traffic, caught up in the chaos and mesmerized by department store windows decorated with holiday scenes. Dashing along busy sidewalks slick with ice and snow, we stumbled on the outstretched feet of a homeless man. His pants were torn and a tattered scarf flapped around his neck like a piece of frayed rope. He was trying to keep warm in the bitter cold. We didn't think to stop, but Mom did. She took us by the hand and approached the man with a smile.

"Hello, how are you?" She said.

She asked his name and inquired if he'd been able to find shelter the previous night. The man seemed shocked that anyone—especially someone with children—would stop to 'see' him as a person. Mom opened her purse, fumbled for her wallet and slipped a few dollars into his gloveless hands. As she did so, she gathered us closer and into their conversation. It was a bit unnerving. It would not be the last time Mom drew us into such an exchange. She never lectured us—then or ever—about helping the needy, but she always

⁵ David Briggs, "Parents are top influence in teens remaining active in religion as young adults" in *The Christian Century*, (Dec, 24, 2014), pp. 16-17.

took time to explain why someone might not have a family or a home or a job or presents under the tree.⁶

We learn much from our parents: the good, the bad and the ugly—to quote a beloved spaghetti western title from my youth. How then, shall we teach them? Through our actions, Tertullian would say. We ought to walk as he walked.

Story two comes from a formative book for me authored by Robert Ellsberg entitled *All Saints*, which is a collection of short biographies of saintly souls in the church and beyond it. This the tale of St. Alban from 3rd century England.

St. Alban was a prominent citizen—possibly a soldier—who lived in Roman-occupied Britain sometime in the third century. According to legend...Alban gave shelter to a priest fleeing persecution. Although Alban was a non-Christian, he was touched by the piety of his guest, and after several days he asked to receive instruction and to be baptized in the Christian faith. Aware that soldiers were in close pursuit, Alban contrived to assist the priest's escape by exchanging clothes. When the soldiers arrived at his house they seized Alban, dressed in the priest's cloak, and led him bound to the judge. Upon discovering his identity, the enraged judge declared, "Since you have chosen to conceal a sacrilegious rebel rather than surrender him to my soldiers to pay the well-deserved penalty for his blasphemy against our gods, you shall undergo all the tortures due to him if you dare to abandon the practice of our religion." Alban declared himself to be a Christian and willingly submitted to the judgment of the court. He was flogged and beheaded.

[Venerable Bede, the historian] records that Alban's executioner was so moved by the courage and fate of the condemned that he in turn confessed the faith and was "baptized" in the blood of his own martyrdom. And so the principal of mercy, once enacted by Alban, set in motion an endless chain reaction continued in the memory and telling of his story.⁷

These are good narratives, underscoring the reality that we often teach the faith through our actions. How, then, might we live these stories today? I find our scripture text for this morning helpful in this regard.

1. None of us is perfect. Parents are not and will not be perfect. Pastors are not and will not be perfect. Parishioners are not and will not be perfect. Humility is key in pastoring or parenting or any kind of Christian living. It is important for all of us adults to own our imperfections and not let them

⁶ Craig and marc Kielburger, *The World Needs Your Kid: Raising Children Who Care and Contribute* (Toronto, ON (CA): Greystone Books Ltd., 2014), pages 4-5.

⁷ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 267-268.

become an impediment. 1st John and our Jesus story tells us that our mistakes at parenting and pastoring and Christian living are not the final word. Jesus is the final Word, and part of his ministry to us is permission to dust ourselves off after a fall and try again. I do not gloss over the damage done by poor choices, but the way of Jesus is God's way of providing us all a way forward. Jesus leads us forward showing us a way.

2. Secondly, this thought of following the way of Jesus calls to mind the words from 1st John that we ought to walk just as he walked. This suggests the *Imitation of Christ*, to quote the famous title attributed to Thomas à Kempis. In our time and place let us strive to walk as Jesus walked. And maybe as we strive to walk as he walked, we will more deeply understand the grace and glory of the incarnation. And maybe if we do this, perhaps, a few of our children or grand-children will embrace the rich life that goes beyond earthly riches. Perhaps. It will be their choice. But we can do what we can do. Let us walk as he walked. Be generous. Be merciful. Be shrewd in naming injustice as an injustice. Walk as he walked. Maybe some of this will rub off on our children, grand-children and society. Maybe, God willing.
3. Finally, the ministry to the hearts of our children, grandchildren, nephews, and nieces goes beyond us. On a day like today, I think, we are invited to rest in God's Spirit which will follow those entrusted to us long after they leave our spheres of influence. God will continually seek to touch their hearts, minds, and souls in very specific ways. If we think we love the child or the elder or the partner in our lives, we need to remember that God loves them in ways which exceed us. If any of these wanders far from their home in God, God still travels alongside them. We do the best we can and trust God to the rest. In the most generous of situations we plant good seed and nurture those seeds. God, we trust, will tend to much of the weeding and watering. They are, after all, as much God's children as our children. And for that we can give thanks. We are all God's children, and for that we can give thanks.

Amen.

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