

Shouldn't It Be Simple

April 28, 2024

Acts 8:26-40
1 John 4:7-21

Shouldn't it be simple?

In this sermon we call the First Letter of John – at least, we think it's a sermon, because it doesn't open or close like a first century letter – in this sermon we call the First Letter of John, the preacher really only urges two things: Believe in Jesus. Love like Jesus.

That's it.

Believe in Jesus. Love like Jesus.

Isn't that simple?

John took a few more words to say that, of course. According to bible.allanhortle.com, there are 2,511 words in First John – that's a little less than double the word count of one of my sermons, if you're curious. The most frequently used word, with 61 appearances, is "God." John used "love" 35 times, more often than "Jesus."

Believe in Jesus. Love like Jesus.

Why take so much effort, why use so many words to say something I just put into six words? Shouldn't it be simple? Why, with a title like "Shouldn't It Be Simple," am I going to use about 1300 more words to say the same thing?

Believe in Jesus. Love like Jesus.

Because John knew, and I know, and you know, that what's simple is not always easy.

Janette H. Ok writes at Working Preacher, "Love is not God, but God is love, meaning that believers are to understand love on God's terms and according to God's character. The author intertwines theology and ethics in such a way that he describes Christian confession as inextricable from Christian conduct. Those who know God show God through their love for others."

Christian confession is inextricable from Christian conduct.

I should point out here that when John spoke of love, he did not speak of feelings. The love he wrote about is the love that takes care of someone else regardless of how you feel about them. John – and God – know that human beings don't fully control how they feel. We have a lot more ability to control what we do.

Love comes first from God – John was clear about that. “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us...” God's love is one of the easiest things to experience in the world. You don't even have to live here on Hawai'i Island to appreciate the extravagant beauty of Creation. We are surrounded by delights for the senses: colors to see, perfumes to smell, surfaces to touch, songs to hear, foods to taste. Rainbows stretch across the sky in stunning contrast to deep grays of clouds. One moment we breathe in the stunning scent of tuberose, the next the aroma of sea spray. Our fingers delight both in the smooth surfaces of polished stone and in the soft fur of a pet cat. The rumble of ocean waves sets the beat for birdsong. Our mouths delight as much in the savory flavors of meats and vegetables as in the sweet tanginess of fruit and chocolate.

God could have created a dim and austere world. God didn't. Extravagant beauty is a clear sign of God's extravagant love.

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John wrote, “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.” God wasn't content to leave us to enjoy Creation – or to ignore it, as too many do to their loss. God sent Jesus as an expression of love, a love so deep that it went beyond rejection, beyond death. This is a love that goes beyond deserving or worth. This is a love that simply says, “I love you now and always.”

This is a love that is brighter than a rainbow.

And it's simple. God is love. God so loved us.

Believe in Jesus. Love like Jesus.

Judith Jones writes at Working Preacher, “In case we haven't understood the seriousness of this command, 1 John expresses it in a way that leaves no room for doubt: ‘just as God is, so are we in this world’ (1 John 4:17 b). In context, it's clear that 1 John is not saying that Christians are omnipotent or omniscient or morally pure. No, 1 John is saying that because God lives in us, we embody God's love for the world. We are not gods, but we are God's. God's love is incarnate in us.”

On a similar line of thought, David Bartlett writes at Working Preacher, “It is not ‘we ought to love because he first loved us’ as if God's love were the ground for a new imperative. It is ‘we can love because he first loved us.’ God's love is the ground for a new possibility.”

God's love, incarnate in us, makes for new possibilities of love among us, from us, around us.

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John was not naïve. The occasion for this sermon – which may have been written elsewhere to be read to a distant congregation – seems to have been a split in the congregation that first heard this text. As I mentioned the other week, John had some harsh things to say about those who left, calling them “children of the devil,” which gives you a pretty good idea of how deep the conflict and the divisions went. With hurt, recriminations, and anger still reverberating, John urged a return to the standard of love.

Given that he struggled with it himself – I just can't forget those words “children of the devil” – I suspect it was a long process within that church, within its leadership, within the author himself. I also suspect that later Christians failed to keep the standard, and had to repeat the process over and over again.

Why do I suspect this? Because I know something about history, and about the history of the Church. Christianity has not made human beings immune from the temptations of power, self-righteousness, and selfishness. If we were immune from temptation, there would be only one Church. We might have different congregations worshiping in different styles because different people approach God best in different ways, but we would be one Church, and nobody would be concerned about it. We would also be living at peace with Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and adherents of hundreds of different faiths, because darn it, war contradicts love as thoroughly as may be.

Brian Peterson writes at Working Preacher, “Much of the anger that erupts within the church under the banner of loving God and defending God's truth often seems to grow instead from love of self and of the power that comes from winning the argument, even at the expense of the church's unity in love.”

Believe in Jesus. Love like Jesus. Simple, but not easy.

John wrote that perfect love casts out fear, and that conversely, fear is the barrier to love. Well, it's *a* barrier to love. Personally, I think greed is more serious obstacle. But David Bartlett tells this story about love and fear, and it may even have something to say about selfishness:

“A small child received a jack-in-the box for Christmas and, to the parents' surprise, was not delighted by the puppet's popping out but terrified. Not entirely daunted though, the child turned the handle once again until the puppet jumped out again. This time the child kissed the puppet he had feared.

The child was far from fearless. But by loving, he sought to put fear in its proper place.”

By loving, the child transformed the object of fright into an object of affection. By loving, you and I can transform the person we fear into the person we appreciate. When loving, we have to reach beyond our sense of safety. When loving, we use our courage. When loving, we have to give of ourselves. When loving, we set selfishness aside.

It's so much simpler than hiding our hearts away. It's so much simpler than hiding our resources away. It's so much simpler than hiding our deep commitments away. It's so much simpler than hiding our faith away.

Believe in Jesus. Love like Jesus.

Shouldn't it be simple?

Amen.

by Eric Anderson