

CONQUERING THE WORLD

1 John 5:1-5

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John 15:9-17

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TEXT: 1 John 5:4 “Whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.”

PURPOSE: To celebrate our faith in Jesus as endowed with power to overcome whatever in the world works against God’s loving, life-giving will.

What a momentous day this is! What a bundle of emotions it evokes! First of all, it’s Mother’s Day, which, for many of us, for many varied reasons, evokes many different emotions. Thank God for that deep and broad Mother’s Day prayer, offered earlier in this worship, which lifts up so many of the emotions which this day triggers. Many of you know that Lindy and I, accompanied by our son Caleb and his son Logan, drove to Kentucky two weeks ago to participate in our daughter Grace’s wedding to our new daughter-in-law Evy. At that delightful event, I witnessed the powerful bond of love between Grace and Lindy, as well as between Evy and her mother. Yes, Evy’s dad and I got to escort our daughters to the marrying place, but I had no doubt that it was their mothers’ love which really carried Evy and Grace to this place of affirmation and commitment.

Along with Mother’s Day, here we are, back to offering worship in person in this building. We haven’t had a physically present congregation since October, and we’ve been originating our online worship in the Friendship House since January. Given the fact that the virus remains a matter of significant concern, we shouldn’t be making too much of our being here in person. But just being together in this sacred space evokes a huge gratitude that we’ve come this far. That said, I do hope we commit to being prudent and patient and cautious as we find our way through this phase of the pandemic, which, no matter how much we want it to be over, is definitely not over.

Today’s passage from the Gospel According to John is one of the most profound passages in the Bible. As Jesus was preparing his inner circle of disciples for his departure, he told them that he regarded them as friends, not servants, and that he’d chosen them to bear the fruit of their relationship with him. Those images have given me much grist for the preaching mill over the years. But it was a phrase from the First Letter of John that caught my attention for today. In that passage, John wrote that those who believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah and the beloved Son of God *conquer the world*. Really? Are we believers actually capable of conquering the world? Do we have what is needed to prevail against the world’s deceptions and temptations, against its malevolent forces, against its exploitation of people and of nature? Can we turn

the world away from its astounding inclination to self-destruction?

My suspicion is that, even if we believed we could conquer the world, most of us are not at all interested in taking up such an enormous task. The world as we perceive it is too messy, too complicated. Its troubles are too troubling, its injustices are too entrenched, and its diseases, of the body and of the soul, are too infectious. And then, there's this: some of us, indeed many of us, if we consider everyone living on planet earth, are barely able to conquer what's getting in the way of peaceful, sustainable living for ourselves and for the people closest to us. When a person is barely able to pay the bills, when a person is struggling with an insidious addiction, when a family is torn apart by abuse, when a person is living with a chronic and degenerative disease, when any of us is dealing with any day-in, day-out challenge of any sort, where's the energy for investing oneself in even one worthy cause, let alone taking on all the world's problems?

I get lots of emails from organizations and movements invested in making the world a more just, a more peaceful, a more sustainable place. Occasionally the emails ask me to contact my elected representatives to advocate concerning a specific piece of legislation. If I click on the "make your voice heard" button, it takes me to a letter about the issue that the organization has already written, which I can amend if I want to but usually, I don't. All I have to do is type in my name and contact information. Once that's done, I push the 'send' button, and I have the satisfaction of thinking that I just contributed to conquering the world. A day or two later, I receive a form letter from my representative, saying that she takes public input seriously and will keep my opinion in mind as she considers the legislation. All of which, for me and for her, is very nice and convenient. But I have no illusion that this exercise even slightly moves the needle regarding the problems of our world which need conquering. I am certain that writing to our elected representatives is not what John had in mind when he affirmed that believers were conquerors of the world. What the passage says is that love for God and for God's children, coupled with faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God are the twin forces which alone can conquer the world.

Often, when I'm playing around with ideas for a sermon, a song will come to mind, and I'll find myself singing it while I jot down ideas. For this sermon, the song was "What the World Needs Now." The always helpful internet informed me that Jackie DeShannon recorded it in 1965. At least some of you have been alive long enough to recall the chorus:

“What the world needs now is love, sweet love
It's the only thing that there's just too little of
What the world needs now is love, sweet love
No not just for some, but for everyone.”

I'm sure the Apostle John would heartily agree with Jackie. But the verses of that song, which acknowledge that we don't need another mountain or another meadow, seem to me to be totally irrelevant. If I were writing verses for our time, I'd suggest that we don't need another piece of legislation, and we don't need another demonstration. Actually, I do believe we need good legislation and massive demonstrations calling for a more just and sustainable world, but what we really need is a global change of heart. What we really need is a shift in what we trust, from trusting ourselves and the things we have made, to trusting God. What we really need is behavior grounded in the conviction that we are truly connected with every other person on the planet and with the natural world, and that our ability to face the challenges we face is intricately woven into the ability others have to face their challenges. What we most need is faith, faith, to recall another song, that God really does have the whole world in God's loving hands. That's what the Apostle John insisted: “This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.” (1 John 5:4)

Later in that farewell discourse from the Gospel of John which includes today's passage, the apostle recalled Jesus making this bold claim: “In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” (John 16:33) The gospel truth is that Jesus has already done all the conquering that needs to be done. Whatever conquering that is ours to do isn't directly conquering, but is living in full confidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus has already conquered every power in the world which appears to be subverting God's will.

In both his gospel and his letter, John makes it clear what's involved in that confident living. “You are my friends if you do what I command you,” says Jesus. (John 15:14) “The love of God is this, that we obey his commandments,” says John, (1 John 5:3) who wanted his readers to know that God's commandments are not burdensome. Confidence that Jesus has already conquered the world has nothing to do with complacency. Our faith that Jesus has done what conquering needs to be done is demonstrated by our obedience.

And our obedience has to do with just one thing. Here's a word from Jesus about that, again from that farewell discourse: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. As I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

Trusting that Jesus has already gained the victory doesn't mean that we get to act as if the covid-19 virus isn't dangerous. It does mean that we should be advocating the sharing of resources to meet the challenge of a global pandemic, because that is loving others as Jesus has loved us. Trusting that Jesus has already gained the victory doesn't mean that we can act as if injustice and oppression don't exist. It does mean that we have a God-given responsibility to right the wrongs that plague our world. Trusting that Jesus has already gained the victory doesn't mean that we can ignore the hard work of advocating for good laws and against bad ones. It does mean that we engage in that work with thoughtfulness and persistence and respect for people who disagree with us.

Trusting that Jesus, by his death and resurrection, has already gained the victory means that we face the world's ugliness with the power of love, love for others derived from God's love for us, love perfected by Jesus' obedience, even to his death on the cross, love which we are convinced is the greatest power on the planet. Which gets me humming one more song, written and sung by Stevie Wonder:

"Love's in need of love today; don't delay, send yours in right away.
The force of evil plans to make you its possession
and it will if we let it destroy everybody.

So hear me when I say that love's in need of love today."

Ever since this song came to mind, I've been wondering: what is the love that's in need of love? Is it our love in need of God's love, or is it God's love in need of our love? I have no doubt that God's is the love which can accomplish that global change of heart which the world desperately needs. But God chooses to communicate God's love through the love we have for each other. So I think it's our love which God's love needs. It's our love which makes God's love real in our beautiful but endangered world. So please, send yours in right away. And believe that however we love, and whoever we love, our love is partnering with the holy love which conquers the world.