

2 John

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- [0 : 00] Well, good morning and welcome to Holy Trinity Church. We are so glad that you've come. And especially on a day when cards and letters will be arriving all over the globe to mothers, at least for those of us who still have mothers who are living. It is completely accidental that we arrive at a letter today from one to a lady and her little children.
- You'll see it right there in verse 1. And that's as close to a Mother's Day reference as you'll get from me today. The elder to the elect lady and her children.
- Who is the lady and these little ones? There's a wide variety of interpretations that have found their way into the history of the church over the centuries.
- Some felt that the lady actually was named, in a sense, elect. A woman by that name. It's more likely, though, to think of this phrase, the audience to whom this letter was written, by way of a metaphor, namely to a church and her congregants.
- I mean, it would be unusual to have two ladies of the same name by looking at verse 1 and the way the letter ends in verse 13. The children of your elect sister greet you.
- [1 : 53] Indeed, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament and in other literature, the church is often referred to with a feminine gender.
- At times, the church is called the wife of God the Father or the bride. The church is the mother, the daughter.
- In 1 Peter 5.13, he references the church in terms of, she who is in Babylon greets you. And so, in all likelihood, you have here a letter that is written to the church and those who comprise that church.
- And the author, if that indeed is the audience, is one simply referred to as the elder. Unnamed, obviously known, and probably one who had some measure of stature in regard to their understanding of the Christian faith.
- Over history, as a matter of history, many have associated the writer of this letter with John the Apostle or the disciple. But as a matter of the historical record, that certainly is not universally held and ought to rightly, in some sense, be a matter of discussion or interest.
- [3 : 22] As a matter of history, we know of a work titled The Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord, written by Papias, who would have lived around 130 or 140 A.D., the Common Era.
- And it was his effort to, in a sense, accumulate the teachings of the Lord by speaking with those who had heard the apostles.
- You can imagine the apostolic era now closing and in an oral context, wanting to hold on to the things that the Lord had said.
- And this work by Papias is referenced by both Eusebius and Jerome, and they cite it in a way which leads one to believe there are two Johns in the early church, John the disciple or the apostle, and also a one named John who was termed the elder.
- Let me reference how Eusebius cites it. Quote, On any occasion, when a person came who had been a follower of the elders, I would inquire about the discourses of the elders, referring now to Papias' work.

[4 : 39] What was said by Andrew, or by Peter, or by Philip, or by Thomas, or James, or by John, or Matthew, or any of the other Lord's disciples, and what Aristion and the elder John, the disciples of the Lord say?

There it is. Mentioning of John in the bundling of disciples' names, but then, and, and then another one named, a non-disciple, and then one named John the elder.

And so when we come to the text today, while it certainly has linguistic connections to what people would reference in the Gospel of John, or obviously 1 John, we ought to at least be humble enough to say we're not entirely sure who it came from.

In fact, there is some thought that it served as a cover letter to 1 John. That it traveled together, this to kind of outline what the letter was going to be about, and while the letter of 1 John went to a particular place, it would have traveled around, and we're not really sure.

But suffice it to say that over time, it became recognized as part of the authoritative teaching of the apostolic record, and was included in the canon, and now sits here before us today, longing to hear what he has to say.

[6 : 09] Let me say this. I've never preached a message from this letter. And yet, in all of its brevity, it may have its thumb on the particularity of issues that the church in the West needs most desperately to wrestle through over the next 10 years.

at least, by way of introduction to it today, let me put it before you. The letter is concerned with the complex relationship of the Christian faith as it relates to truth, love, and limits.

That's the triad in which the letter unfolds. the pastor's joy is that some were walking in the truth.

But that truth is intricately related to love. And that love is set within a context of limits. I can think of no greater triad for the church to be thinking its way through over the next 10 years than a proper relationship of those three.

So let's take a look. The thing which brings the elder joy was to see his congregation walking in the truth.

[7 : 39] Verse 4, I rejoice greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth just as we were commanded by the Father. Now the inclination toward truth at the outset of the letter didn't emerge in verse 4.

I mean, look at the prescript in verse 1. It's the elder to the elect lady and her children whom I love in truth. And not only I but all who know the truth because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever.

And then in what is a normal opening greeting on grace, mercy, and peace he's going to include truth. Look, grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son in truth and love.

So in the greeting he's intricately connected no fewer than four times the word truth and twice its relationship to love. And so then the opening line is simply this.

What gives the pastor in this sense I'm using that term broadly the elder what gives him great joy? Nothing more great joy than to find that some of your children are walking in the truth.

[9 : 00] Notice the word some an indication coming out of 1 John that this letter was written at a time when the church was beginning to splinter and competing views on what the truth was were beginning to diverge and within even probably the early apostolic communities there was an exiting of some and congregants with them toward an alternative understanding of the truth.

You know we always long for the church to go back we say to the days of the acts of the apostles as if somehow when revival would fall and the spirit would come down that all people would be walking in accord with the truth.

But that's a romanticized view of the church wheat and tares his great joy is that some that some are walking in the truth.

He had gotten news that some of the people that he had had influence on earlier in life and that indeed were now part of this congregation were still carrying on with the apostles teaching.

I think of this all the time as we raise children here and they leave our midst or as they come to Christ here and continue on in our midst. What a joy to know that some some oh I pray that all would walk in the truth.

[10 : 44] A pastor's joy is not unlike a teacher's joy in seeing some of her students grabbing hold of the subject that they're teaching in a way that really matters.

I mean is there any greater joy than seeing those you're investing in grab hold of what you're after? It's the same thing for a pastor. It's not unlike a coach who sees his or her players put their instructions that were laid out in practice actually into a game situation.

I mean to actually see the execution of what you know must happen if we're to overcome the opposition and to draw it up is one thing but to watch people enter the field of battle and actually do it oh there's nothing greater.

It's not unlike a parent's joy in seeing a child walk in a manner that's worthy of all of their instruction. For a parent to say you know this is the way of truth and then for a child to actually walk in it there is no greater joy.

Contrast this guy's sense of his congregation with Moses of old.

[12 : 06] I've thought about the congregation that Moses was called to. Wow. I mean you can see now reading back into the life of that congregation why at that burning bush he might have had some serious reservation about accepting that call.

It wasn't long before that was called church of the stiff necked. That's the phrase that runs through. And what a contrast to the church that Joshua was given charge over.

At the end of the book of Joshua we read these words and Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the Lord did for Israel.

Wow. That that's the congregation you want to serve. People often ask me what's your congregation like? I often tell them I'm fortunate enough to live among and with people who are earnest joyful and wanting to please the Lord.

I feel like for 19 years we've been a place that is trying to walk in the truth. I mean I feel more like Joshua than Moses and quite frankly glad for it.

[13 : 36] A little while ago received a text actually from someone who used to be a member here. Pastor Helm I don't know if you remember me then he goes on to give his name I was at your church some seven to eight years ago I was a baseball player at the University of Chicago I just wanted to let you know that you and your church were a huge influence on my life and I'm forever grateful.

I volunteer now in my church in Arizona with the youth group and I run a young adult Bible study at my house. My faith and love for Jesus defines who I am and I was able to keep that strong in my heart throughout college because of you and I'm going to read that you as in you plural please send my love to your wonderful family.

It wasn't long ago there was a young couple sitting in our midst with a number of children. He had come to faith in Christ in accordance with the truth while at the medical school here at the University of Chicago and had moved and been gone many years and was for some reason back in town and in they came and walked down and all their children now growing and he looked at me and he basically said I want you to know we still believe.

Well that's a great joy. It doesn't get any better than that. You may not know who prayed today but I do. I remember Dan Harak now gray haired when he was a freshman in our midst ethnically from India and fully giving his life to Christ early in his time and I remember Jing being introduced to what is Christianity and sitting with her at an outdoor cafe and talking to her about faith and hearing yes pastor home that is what I believe and I want to be baptized and I remember that and now I see them growing there is no greater joy than to see some of your children walking in the truth.

I could do this 15, 20, 30 times this morning just by looking out here. No greater joy.

[16 : 05] That said the apostle weds his request to his joy.

Look at verse 5 and now I ask you dear lady not as though I were writing you a new commandment but the one we've heard from the beginning that we love one another and this is love that we walk according to his commandments this is the commandment just as you have heard from the beginning so that you should walk in it.

His joy is they walk in the truth but he weds truth with the necessity of love. Love is the handmaiden to truth.

In other words he's saying and really right from the opening line that wherever you find truth you should find love. Here it's distinct, it's particular, it's love for one another.

Just as we saw in 1 John it's really a love for those who believe what you believe about Jesus. It's an in house love.

[17 : 21] It's a Christian love. It's a especially the brethren love. Now that doesn't mean that the author doesn't think we should love everyone but he is not writing a dissertation on the fullness of love with multiple chapters.

This is 200 word letters, short, brief, it's a monograph on a narrow swath of something he wants to say and he wants the church in a day where it's fractured and warring to love itself because love of one another is the outworking of truth.

Indeed, the connection that this love is needed because of the fractured sense within the community of faith is there. Verse 7, for many deceivers have gone out into the world those who do not confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh.

It was the conflict of teaching about Jesus that people began to set up shop in different ways but love ought to be the hallmark of the church.

It ought to be the hallmark of this church. And there is a way that you can speak of love in distinction from truth. He does so here. You can speak of truth and love.

[18 : 46] It isn't merely that truth is love or that love is truth. No, you can speak of truth and love. I joy that you walk in the truth. I ask that you continue in love.

I'm grateful that some of you come here because at least to the best of our ability you believe that when you come we're trying to preach the truth to you. I am equally grateful that you stay because there's an inseparable union with community truth and love.

I'm sorry that you find people who love one another and therefore are willing to listen to what their pastor has to say. Truth and love.

love. What does the love of Christ look like? What ought it look like here? Love is by nature self-sacrificial by nature.

love. it's not connected to, it's not inherently connected to the way one feels.

[20 : 03] Love is outside of itself. Love extends itself. Love focuses on other people.

Love doesn't merely come to Sunday that you might offer your individual praises to God, which you should, but you actually come to offer words that would encourage others in your midst.

Why do you go to church? Oh, I go every week. Yeah, but why do you go? Well, I pray before I go. Yeah, but why do you go? Well, I pray every week that I might meet someone that I could encourage in their faith.

Really? Really? You go to church for them? Yes. But don't you go to praise God? Yes, I go to praise God. But I can praise God at home.

I can praise God in my car. I can praise God when I walk. I can praise God at work. I can't build other people up when I'm by myself. I go to church for other people.

[21 : 11] By nature, that's what this place ought to be. It ought to be meeting tangible needs, material needs.

We're going to take another offering at the end of this service, which we do infrequently, that the express purpose of that offering is to meet the material needs of those who are in this community of faith who are undergoing duress at this time in their life.

All those needs should be met. It's one thing to look someone here in the eye this morning and before you hit that door say, hey, take care.

It's another thing for a visitor to enter into our midst and to look us in the eye and say, I notice that you take care.

That's love. Now, it gets down to some real practical things then. How do you love those that you do not know? It's not that easy.

[22 : 25] Some of you have names I can almost not pronounce and I need to learn. I need to know. And I need to do it in a way where it's not suddenly Americanized.

I ought to know you. I ought to know you. You ought to know one another. Some of the greatest moments in church then are the ways that what we're saying with our voice actually is encouraging others.

You probably notice sometimes I'm in the front row. Maybe it makes you uneasy. Sometimes I'll turn around and look at you while we're singing because I kind of feel like that's what we all ought to be doing. I mean, I can sing at home by myself, but I want you to see me singing because I want to encourage you.

The folks are leading, but they're actually asking you to join them. We are encouraged as we see one another affirm the things that we believe.

Love. His joy is truth. His request is they wed it to love. Verse 7 demonstrates why the connection between truth and love is so important.

[23 : 49] And then he goes on to do a surprising thing. He moves from truth to love to limits. Did you know love has limits? Love can't have limits.

Love is as boundless as the ocean. Well, in one sense you could speak of it like that. But this writer could also tell you how to speak of it in another way. Because love without limits isn't really love that came according to the doctrine and the teaching of the apostles, nor of Jesus.

Two things, as we look to the end of the letter. Two things he commands them. First, regarding the limits, he says put some limits on yourself. The first concern is watching yourself.

You ought to put limits on yourself. Did you know that? Verse 8, Watch yourself so that you may not lose what we have worked for but may win a full reward.

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. Watch yourself.

[24 : 59] I've seen it over the years, over the decades. You can walk out of faith along two very simple lines. You can either relinquish your hold on the truth because you're not watching yourself.

But not only can you relinquish your hold on the truth, you can let go of your responsibility to love. Both of those happen. You can stray from the line of truth and you can leave off with the way of love.

It doesn't take long in the human heart to say, I will not love you. You drive me nuts. And what's the indication?

When you're deviating from the hard truths of the Christian faith by way of assent, or you're deciding not to exercise self-sacrificial love relationally, they are both manifestations not of their problem or the Bible's problem, but of your problem.

You forgot to watch yourself. So that's what it is. Love has limits. We need to limit ourselves in regard to what do I believe?

[26 : 23] And am I really willing to love? Because the loosening of our grip on truth or letting go of our responsibility to love are manifestations that we've forgotten to keep watch over ourselves.

That's what Jude would say in verse 21. Keep yourself in the love of God. It takes work. It takes work. Practically, how do you go about watching yourself?

Well, once a month, at least, we take communion here, and it actually says examine yourself. And the examination that he's asking the church to do is, how am I treating other people in the congregation? Even socioeconomically.

Am I at one with everyone? Is this truly my brother, my sister, regardless of their race, regardless of their cultural differences?

Are you giving yourself to them? Examine yourself. Watch yourself in love. A wonderful thing. The problem is our willingness to embrace doctrinal error or our propensity to be critical of other people.

[27 : 39] Well, it's a sure sign that we're not keeping watch over ourselves. I used to tell my kids growing up, now they're grown. You know, they'd be like in the grocery store aisle, not these two.

It must have been their older three siblings, but, you know, you've seen it. I mean, some of you, you've seen it or you've had to deal with it as your own, but you're embarrassed and your kid's on the ground in the grocery store aisle or down your hallway and you're looking at them just rolling around and I used to just look at them and say, hey, look, if you don't control yourself, who will?

You know, and the three-year-old face looks up at me like, what are you talking about? But that's the truth. That's self-control. It's self-control.

Did you know that? Self-control is a self-control. Watch yourself. If you don't control yourself, who will? And that goes for adults too. I don't know how I got into that.

We better get out of it. Let me move to the second limitation, which to me is the most surprising thing of all the texts. Verse 10. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting.

[29 : 00] For whoever greets him also takes part in his wicked works. This is totally surprising. It's not just a word, a command that we have to watch ourselves.

Now there's a command about how we would receive or not others. It's really fascinating because this is the one who calls us to love one another and yet he also calls us to be inhospitable to some.

That's a surprise. That's the irony of the whole letter. The apostle of love would have you shut your door on some. Now, in our day, we just don't have any categories for a love like this.

Let me give you our understanding of love. Our understanding of love is an all-inclusive love. You ever go to an all-inclusive...

These people now, they go to all-inclusive vacations. Some of you maybe, but let's just say we read about the others who go. From what I understand, you go to something that's all-inclusive, man, you can go anywhere you want.

[30 : 06] You can like swim up to a margarita bar over here and take off to a little Mexican food over there and find yourself with someone bringing you a towel over here. It's all-inclusive.

You go anywhere you want. Do anything you want. It's all-inclusive love. That's the only kind of love we know anymore. Evidently not. John the Elder, evidently, if it's John the Elder, didn't stay at any kind of resort like that.

He's a Tom Beaudet, Motel 6 kind of guy. Hoping someone had a light on for him. His understanding of love has limits. Hey, we've got to get this straight.

This is that triad I'm telling you about. This is the most important thing for the church in the West over the next ten years. What's the proper relationship between truth, love, and the fact that love has limits? How do you stay in that?

The main difference between this letter, the one who's writing it, and us in the church today is that in our day, a non-discriminating love is the new truth.

[31 : 19] That is our truth. But for the Elder, there must be something about Jesus and His commands, His teachings, His way of life that by nature set Him at odds with our ability to embrace all things and all people.

That's challenging. For us, the one binding truth is unbound love. But for the Elder, an untethered love without limits indicates that you've let go of the rope of truth.

For Him, our reception of truth will mean that we are not welcoming to all. I mean, that sounds absurd.

And in many instances, it is. And circumstantially, depending upon what we're talking about, should be rejected.

But this is the emphasis of the text. Truth, love, love has limits. How easy it is for us to forget this.

[32 : 37] We ought to be known for our hospitality. How can you have a church and not be known for hospitality? It would be a contradiction in terms. Yet, you shouldn't invite every teacher or teaching into your house.

It's especially difficult to hear if you're part of the millennial generation. I'm sorry, I'm not part of your generation. Well, I guess I am if I'm alive. But at any rate, it's especially difficult to hear. For the younger people in our midst, there's a predilection to think that the generation before you was not known for love.

And therefore, you will be known for love. Like, they were known for truth. But I got to tell you something. It's our generation that's known for love.

I mean, we are celebrating this year 50 years of love. We're the generation of love. We're the generation of unbound love. We're the generation of all we do is love. In other words, my generation would say, we're the generation of love.

And the one before us, the pre-World War II guys, they were the truth generation. They did truth without love. We've been doing 50 years of love. But now you come along as a young buck and tell me that you think we're the truth generation and you're the love generation.

[33 : 49] But I would tell you that your love is often without limits. And therefore, without the strength of the apostolic gospel. For John, I'm just going to call him the elder.

I keep calling him John. For the elder, you untether your love. And in doing so, let go of the rope of truth.

To believe today in a completely, in a love that is completely non-discriminating of wisdom is a mistake.

In the end, it will distort the teachings of Jesus. We all want Jesus, but Jesus says there's a day coming and a place where the worm will not die.

Jesus, according to the apocalyptic visions of John, remember it was the revelation of Jesus to the word of the church was very discriminating on what the church would let in and out.

[35 : 08] And that there was going to be accountability. And that he was going to come and make his judgment long before the final judgment. Jesus is portrayed in the revelation of Jesus, concerning Jesus, as one who has a sickle in his hand as well as an arm outstretched.

There's a relationship here, children, between truth and love. And the great challenge for you, for me, in the coming years is to bring those two together, to never let them be separate, but to never go on living in deception that it will be a love without limits.

Wow. Brief letter. Incredible consequences for your conversation today. How do we hold the truth?

How do we do so in a way that necessitates a connection to love? And how do we love well with limits?

Well, I wish he'd been around, you know, verse 12.

[36 : 48] Though I have much to write to you, I'd rather not use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to come to you and talk face to face. Well, for that conversation, you'll have to pick it up with the ones you have lunch with today.

Our Heavenly Father, we need face-to-face conversation on this triad of truth and love and limits. And we want to be a congregation that holds them all, holds them all in the uncomfortable tension of the apostolic gospel.

Help us to do that. In Christ's name, Amen.