

#1776

Cf. #477 #605 #888 #1226 #1492

1 John 4:1-11^a
6th Sunday of Easter
Rogate^b

Believe only those spirits
that acknowledge Christ Jesus.
Supplementary Lectionary Series "B," Epistles

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Grace WELS Durand MI
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Elders & Ushers
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^{4:1} Beloved ones, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges [confesses] that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge [confess] Jesus, is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

⁴ You, little children, are from God and have overcome them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world [that is, the devil].^c ⁵ They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of Truth and the spirit of falsehood.

⁷ Dear beloved ones, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love, does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his One and Only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an Atoning Sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear beloved ones, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

GOD IS LOVE

I. LOVE REVEALED IN HIS SON

II. LOVE REVEALED IN CHRISTIANS

In the Name of Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us, Dear Fellow-Redeemed,

As with last week's text and sermon, the text and sermon for this week deals with love. Love is not "a tickling in the heart that you cannot scratch"; love is that which has as its highest objective that which is in the best interests of those being loved – their best interests,

^a *The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984. All Scripture references are taken from this translation unless noted otherwise.

^b The Sixth Sunday of Easter is *Rogate*, a Latin imperative commanding us to pray. For Jesus' sake our heavenly Father invites us to pray to him and has promised to hear and answer our prayers in ways which are best for us. "Pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

^c Jesus speaks of the devil as "the prince of this world" (John 14:30).

both temporal and spiritual. Love is an emphasis of John's Gospel as well as of his three epistles or letters.

The Apostle John had a special connection to Jesus. John is referred to as the disciple whom Jesus loved. It was John who reclined at table closest to Jesus at the Last Supper. It was John to whom Jesus gave over the care of Jesus' mother Mary. It is not surprising then that, once again, this text from John's First Epistle deals with love. This morning, we examine God's love especially as it is revealed in his Son Jesus and also as is revealed in Christians – believers in Jesus. GOD IS LOVE ... I. LOVE REVEALED IN HIS SON; and, II. LOVE REVEALED IN CHRISTIANS.

GOD IS LOVE I. LOVE REVEALED IN HIS SON

What a wonderful place to begin an examination of this text with the statement in the last part of verse 8, "God is love." Love, the kind explained at the beginning that has in mind the best interests of those being loved – this love is the essence of God. Yes, God is omnipotent; God is omniscient; God is omnipresent; God is eternal; God is kind; but most importantly, God is love. This love of God in Christ Jesus is visible in God's Word.

John writes,

4:1 Beloved ones, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges [confesses] that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 but every spirit that does not acknowledge [confess] Jesus, is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world (4:1-3).

John addresses believers as "beloved ones" or "dearly beloved ones" (Greek: ἀγαπῶντων). They are dearly loved because God created them, preserves them, protects them, and especially redeemed them through his Son, Jesus. The Bible testifies to this in John 3:16(a), the Gospel in a nutshell, when Jesus says, "God so loved the world that he gave his One and Only Son." John described the objective of God's love as revealed in his Word, when he said, "These [Words] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his Name" (John 20:31). But there were those who tried to undermine this central message of the Bible. The false teachings that were being proclaimed by some had the potential of leading people away from faith in Jesus alone as their Savior.

John warns his readers, "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (4:1). A false prophet is one who departs from God's Word in some way. A false church along with its

false pastors and false teachers, do not hold to God's Word in truth and purity. One of the false teachings that was taking place during John's time was that of the Gnostics who taught that Jesus did not really come in the flesh. So, John says, "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" (4:2b). False teaching "that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (4:3a). Such a false teaching undermined redemption and salvation.

Such a false teaching did not confess that "Jesus Christ" was "true God" "from eternity," "and also true man, born of the virgin Mary."^d If Jesus were not true man, then he could not have died. If Jesus were not true God, then his death would be ineffective to remove the sins of the world. Jesus had to be both: True God and True Man – the God-man – in order to take away the sins of the world. Those who denied this, John states clearly, are "not from God." Rather, they are antichrists.

The term "antichrist" means not only to be against Christ. More significantly, antichrist means substitute for Christ. When the Roman Catholic Pope is referred to as "the vicar of Christ," he is absolutely correct without knowing it, for "vicar" and the prefix "anti" mean the same thing: Substitute. An antichrist, a vicar of Christ – whether referring to the Roman Catholic Papacy as "the Antichrist" or any false teacher as antichrist – antichrist means someone who substitutes himself for Christ – tries to take Christ's place. Such attempts are revealed as departures from God's Word.

John also states,

4 You, little children, are from God and have overcome them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world [that is, the devil]. 5 They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of Truth and the spirit of falsehood (4:4-6).

Antichrists and those who follow and believe them have their base in the world – in the things that are important in this world. The things that are important in this world are possessions, pastimes, pleasures, prestige, honor, intelligence, and so on. Those who are from God – believers in Jesus – however, have their base in God's Word in truth and purity. John refers to this when he says that believers can recognize antichrists by comparing "the Spirit of Truth and the spirit of falsehood" (4:6d). Jesus said the same thing when he told the unbelieving Jews, "If I am telling the truth, why do you not believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God" (John 8:46b,47). When the Jews rejected the truths of God's

^d Kuske, David P., *Luther's Catechism – The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House), pp. 5 & 151.

Word all of which pointed to Jesus as the Savior (cf John 5:39), they were lining themselves up against God and against God's Word. So what is the central message of this Word of God?

You have already heard the central message and the whole point of God's Word, from John's Gospel: "These [Words] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his Name" (John 20:31). The Word of God in truth and purity pointed to mankind's great need for a Savior. The Word of God in truth and purity proclaimed Jesus Christ as that Savior. John writes in our text, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his One and Only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an Atoning Sacrifice for our sins" (4:9,10).

Jesus Christ is the Sacrifice of Atonement for the sins of the world (cf. 2:1b,2). "Atonement" means that Jesus made God "at one" with mankind – atonement, "at one ment" (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus did this by taking away the barrier that separated God and mankind. That barrier is sin. Jesus is this substitute for all people in that he took away the sins of all people.

Jesus' holiness and righteousness has been substituted for all people. For "God made [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in [Jesus] we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). The righteousness that God demands, God also supplies through his holy and perfect Son, Jesus. Jesus' suffering and death on the cross is the punishment all people deserve for sin. Jesus' death on the cross has been substituted for the punishment that all people deserve. Through faith alone in Jesus, a person benefits from Jesus' substitutionary atonement. That benefit is eternal life in heaven with Jesus. Again, John says, "These [Words] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his Name" (John 20:31).

APPROPRIATION

I still remember the acronym from taking my written motorcycle test: SIPDE – S I P D E. Look down the road, SIPDE. See it; Identify it; Predict; Decide; Execute. "S" see it down the road. "I" Identify what it is – Is it a stick? Is it a squirrel? Is it a raccoon? "P" Predict what it might do? A stick will stay put. An animal could stay put, run ahead or to the right or the left. "D" Decide on your course of action – continue to go straight, go to the right, go to the left, put on the brakes. "E" Execute what you have decided. This is very similar to what God wants us to do regarding any message – especially spiritual message – we hear or about which we read.

See it or hear it and identify it. Predict whether that message is good or bad on the basis of God's Word. If it is good – in line with God's Word – then decide to hold to it and benefit from it. If it is not in line with God's Word, then decide to avoid it. And do so – Execute, either hold to it or avoid it. The Apostle Paul wrote the same thing to the Thessalonians – and to us: "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:21,22).

Continually, we are to be awake, alert and aware of what is being said, and what we are reading. The false prophets of our day will add to, subtract from, twist and distort God's Word to make it say something it does not say, and to condone sin in some way. Jude describes such people as those who "are godless ..., who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and LORD" (4b).

Some denominations today, for example, have said that same sex-marriage and homosexual behavior are acceptable and commendable. That is false doctrine. It will lead many astray into sin, unbelief and damnation. The Bible says so (cf. Genesis 19; Romans 1:21-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9&10). Avoid it. Some denominations defend abortion – the killing of babies in the womb. The Bible clearly testifies that this is sin (Exodus 21:22-24). The practice and defense of it leads people away from Christ and salvation. Some denominations look the other way regarding sins, which the Bible clearly identifies as sin. This will lead some astray to eternal destruction. Be awake! Be alert! Be aware! Be like the New Testament Bereans.

When Paul and Silas went to the Macedonian town of Berea, they proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus and how the Bible pointed to Jesus as the Savior of the world throughout the centuries. The Bereans "received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11b). So also you: Go back to your Bibles. Read them, learn, mark, inwardly digest them; compare what you hear and read with what the Bible says. Hold to the good; avoid every kind of evil and false teaching.

Moreover, as you continue in this Word of God, you will become more and more convinced that God has revealed his love for you by sending his Son Jesus into the world to be your Savior. In addition, as a Christian – a believer in Jesus – this love of God for you will be revealed as you love one another.

GOD IS LOVE II. LOVE REVEALED IN CHRISTIANS

"God is love" (4:8b). John states, "You, little children, are from God and have overcome them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world [that is, the devil]" (4:4). John refers to the ones to whom he is writing as "little children." He does not mean by this that they are four, five and six years old – although such literal "little children" were included. Rather, John is referring to believers, no matter what their age, as "little children" – God's little children by faith in Jesus (cf. Galatians 3:26). As little children of God, believers have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit works faith in them through the Means of Grace – the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. Since "God is love," and since believers have God, who is love, in them by faith in Jesus, then believers also will reveal love.

John writes, "Dear beloved ones, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love, does not

know God, because God is love” (4:7,8). Here John addresses believers as “dearly loved ones” – they are dearly loved by God who sent his Son as their Sacrifice of Atonement, and they are dearly loved by God who sent the Holy Spirit into their hearts to create faith in Jesus through the Gospel. Since this love comes from God and is now in believers, then believers are going to love one another. Thus, John states in the last verse of our text, “Dear beloved ones, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (4:11).

“God so loved us” by sending “his One and Only Son into the world that we might live through him” (4:9). God “sent his Son as an Atoning Sacrifice for our sins” (4:10b). It is this love of God in Christ Jesus, that is in believers by faith, that motivates believers to love one another. John points out further, “Whoever does not love, does not know God, because God is love” (4:8). A person simply cannot be a Christian, if he does not love others. On the other hand, faith in Jesus will produce in believers love for one another.

APPLICATION

Loving others, even fellow believers, can sometimes be very difficult and hard. Different people – different believers – may make decisions with which we do not agree. Such decisions may not be sinful, that is contrary to God’s Word, for that would be a different matter, and in such cases, we would show love by rebuking and correcting with a view to winning them over to God’s Word (cf. 2 Timothy 4:2). But a fellow believer may make a decision that is not wrong, is not contrary to God’s Commandments, is not contrary to God’s Word. We might think such decisions are unwise, though not contrary to God’s Word. For that reason, it would not be right for us not to love our fellow believers in Jesus. Yet loving others, fellow believers included, can be hard and difficult.

How do we overcome such difficulty and reluctance to love? Look at the cross! Not loving one of our fellow believers presents no where near the difficulty of God’s loving you and me. St. Paul said, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.... When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to [God] through the death of his Son” (Romans 5:8&10a). How did our perfect and holy God overcome the impossibility of his loving you and me, wretched sinners? He sent his Son to the cross. “Dear beloved ones, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (4:11). You and I reflect and reveal God’s love for us in Christ Jesus by loving others – especially our fellow believers (cf. Galatians 6:10).

CONCLUSION

God is love. God revealed his love for you and me and the world by sending his Son, Jesus, to be the Sacrifice of Atonement for the sins of the world – your sins and mine. Only Jesus, “the God incarnate, man divine”^e – the God-man – could do this. By sending Jesus, God, who is love, revealed his love for us. You and I as believers in Jesus reveal this same love of God by loving others. Amen.

^e *Christian Worship – A Lutheran Hymnal, Authorized by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), Hymn: 370, verse 2.