

“Conquering the World”

1 John 5:1-6

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1 John 5:1-6

¹Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

⁶This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

Prayer.

There have been many throughout the course of human history many who have set their eye upon conquering the world. I think of Cyrus, the king of the Babylonian empire nearly six hundred years before Christ, who pushed his borders in every direction, finally being defeated in his quest towards Egypt. I think of Caesar Augustus, whose legions conquered increasingly distant lands, stretching supply lines and diluting his power base. I think of crusading knights streaming from France and England in an attempt to retake the Holy Lands by force. And I think of Hitler, Stalin, and Herohito in the last century, each of whom had their eye on regional or world domination.

To what end? To what end, the historian in me begs to ask. To sew carnage, violence, rape and murder on global scales? To feed hatred and breath new life into genocide with each successive generation? I pray our political leaders of today, everywhere throughout the world, would complete a careful review of those in the past who have sought power and domination - and recognize the inevitable failure to which all have led.

We usually think politics when we think of world domination. But think about business for a moment. In our present age, consider Bill Gates and Microsoft. Without question, some of the smartest people on the planet work for Microsoft. They have developed a product, brought it to market, and they make boatloads of money in the process. Microsoft owns nearly 95% of the global market share and Gates is possibly the wealthiest person today. Now that's domination.

The same might be said of Archer, Daniel, Midland and Exxon Mobile, which of course ... makes everyone groan!

We've considered world domination from a political and business point of view; what about religion? Those who claim to dominate the religious world have a difficult time explaining how Christianity, Judaism, and Islam share the world's stage, along with many smaller players, such as Hinduism, Confucianism, and Daoism. It is a pretty difficult position to defend that the only way to God is the exclusive path revealed to me and through my experience.

“Whoever is born of God conquers the world,” we hear the Epistle author speak this morning. It continues the theme of the past couple of weeks about the essential importance of love; the love of others and the love of God. Our Epistle lifts up the importance of righteous living; following the commandments of God, which are not burdensome. Rather, following God’s laws ensures living in a just and peaceful society. And the Epistle author rightly identifies faith as the source of our victory; faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

This we can take to the bank. For us and by our experience ... we believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Our scriptures lift him up as the means of revelation, redemption and salvation. It is not anything that can be proved. It is a belief. It just is. We don’t know the source of our beliefs, however, we attribute the source of our beliefs to the prevenient – or preceding – grace of God. In other words, we believe that God wants us to believe the way we do, so God first planted these thoughts into our minds.

From our humble, personal point of view, the only pathway to God is through the Lord, Jesus Christ. My ultra-conservative fellow students in seminary would quote me in debate the words of Jesus, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) They would take glee in watching me squirm.

Twenty-five years ago, my worldview was considerably smaller and less informed. I didn’t have the articulate skills to formulate a response other than “so you really believe God will be condemning to hell all the Jews and Muslims in the world?” They would laugh, knowing that their theological full-nelson was completely victorious, leaving me and my liberal friends to be shown the door.

I’ve learned a lot since the early 1980s. That’s a good thing. (Leisure suits, long sideburns, and cat glasses will never make a return ... Among others!)

One thing I’ve learned is that Biblical books need to be read in context of the larger Gospel message. The German theologians of the early 20th Century called this “Sitz im Leben” which literally means “setting in life.”

This Epistle of 1st John has its place in the world and in the larger Biblical context. It is largely a text about love; God is love and we are to love. The time is short, so love. Love God, love others, love your enemies, love yourself. Hopefully you’re getting the picture – and can understand why I’m preaching from this Epistle these Sundays of Easter.

First John finds its place supported by the gospels, the work and ministry of Jesus, and in the loving nature of Baptism, Eucharist, Atonement, Redemption, and Salvation. God’s work through Jesus Christ are works of love ... especially for the poor, the downtrodden, the sinner, the outcast, the widow, the orphaned.

To say the way of the cross through Jesus Christ is the only way to God is to remain blind to the loving nature of the cross; the loving nature of Jesus, his ministry, and his gifts to humankind.

This July I will be starting my sixth year here at Zion and my 21st year of ordained parish ministry. I’ve led a lot of confirmation classes in my time, and I hope ... by the grace of God ... that I will continue to lead many in the future. You may have noticed a pattern about my confirmation classes. I take them all to meet, mix, and learn from our Jewish, Islamic, and Roman Catholic friends and neighbors. I have often answered questions about why I have kids go to this effort when it isn’t part of the usual

confirmation curriculum.

I was the chair of the Spiritual Life Committee of the seminary community and I led the planning of what was called “Seminary Day” each Fall and Spring. Our advisors wanted us to arrange for all students to visit, dialogue, and learn from others in the faith community. We arranged for visits to synagogues, temples, Islamic centers, monasteries, convents ... you name it. We invited in scholars from numerous faith traditions to teach and lecture. Each experience was hugely successful ... offering opportunities for insight and spiritual growth.

I learned at that time, and I’ve had reconfirmed with each successive contact with leaders of other faith traditions that we hold love and peace in common. The universal language of faith is love and peace. There is no place for intolerance, violence, or war in a life of faith. When the mind and heart are focused on love and peace, one is led to the God of creation, one God, known in many ways and by many traditions.

Another item that I’ve learned throughout my life, and in which I am continued to be humbled by how little I still know, is the importance, influence, and value of language. Do not underestimate the power of a general’s or politician’s fiery speech, a preacher pulpitering, or a inflammatory talk show host.

The way we use language, craft sentences, employ linguistic skills has everything to do with how our message is communicated from one person to another. It speaks to culture; the values and beliefs with which we are raised; how we fit into our cultural environment; and how our culture relates to other nearby communities of people.

All of which is to say, take a close look at the word “conquering” as it is used in our text for this morning. When we hear the word conquer, we think of World War Two victory ... of Patton kicking Rommel, of Iwo Jima and atom bombs. When we think of the word conquering, we think of winning the cold war, hopeful for an era of Pax Americana, where democracy, open market economics, and pro-western governments thrive. We have been raised and grown to consider a very narrow political understanding of what it means to conquer.

Conquering the world does not mean dominating the world. In the language of the Epistle, consistent with the Gospel, to conquer the world means that we conquer it with love and peace. Whether the instrument of God is Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or some other creed or faith, we are being called to conquer the world with the love that God gives us.

My, oh, my ... how human desire for ego, status, wealth, power, and domination can so easily warp and skew even this simplest of simple essentials about living a life of faith, of following a pathway that leads to God. How difficult of a concept is love?

We only have to turn forward to the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, where he writes that love does not insist on its own ways. (1 Corinthians 13:5). Neither is it boastful, arrogant, irritable, resentful, or rude. It doesn’t rejoice in the wrong, but it does rejoice in the truth. Love is patient and kind.

Love bears all things – all crisis, all troubles, all differences of opinion. Love believes all things – all good things about our God and our relationship with Him. Love hopes all things – that the pathway, that God leads us in our journey of faith, will lead us home. Love endures all things – there is nothing, not anything that can separate us from the love of God. Love never ends – the source of our love, God

Almighty, is the unlimited, unending source of love for our planet.

Which is to say, that all things not of love ... violence, injustice, intolerance, predigest – you name it ... all things not of love are not of God.

My beloved, go forth this day with the intent of conquering the world. Not by threat or domination. Conquer the world with the love of Jesus Christ, the Lord and Master of our lives. Conquer the world with the love of God, the source of all that is loving and good. Go forth and conquer the world with the love of God's Holy Spirit, that gently guides us to do all good things.

The love that is evident in the Gospels and throughout salvation history, is the same love that comes to us this day. It is the love that draws us close to each other and to our God in covenant. It is the love that draws us neigh to the cross, and anchors our experience of love in redemption and salvation. It is the love that sustains us in the living of these days. And it is the same love that, one day, will bring us home.

Dearly beloved, these are the Words of the Lord, as they've come to me this day. Thanks be to God!
Amen.