

“A Different Vision of Human Community”
Ecumenical Advocacy Days
March 12, 2006
I John 3:11-18

I John! Why did it have to be I John?! The organizers have done a splendid job of putting together these Advocacy Days, but why did they have to choose I John as our focus text?!

There are, of course, wonderful passages in this letter, including one of my favorite lines in all of scripture: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (4:18). And the particular text chosen for these Advocacy Days contains one the Bible’s most devastating questions: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” (3:17). But the overall tone of this letter reflects a mindset that we must reject in the name of the gospel!

That’s a pretty radical thing to say, so follow with me while I explain.

I John was written by the leader of a fearful, insecure community that understood itself to be threatened by external enemies and internal dissenters. If we read between the lines of the Gospel according to John, we can tell that this community was originally part of the synagogue; but at some point they were expelled, which is why in the gospel “the Jews” are enemy number one.

In this letter, however, there is a new enemy: those who have left the community, apparently over theological disagreement. And this attack from within has enraged the writer of our epistle. Listen to these verses from chapter two: “Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.... They went out from us, but they do not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us” (2:18-19). These separatists, we are told, are “liars,” “false prophets,” “under the power of the evil one,” “opponents of God.”

As you know, this letter is renowned for its emphasis on love! “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God...” (4:7). Indeed, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (4:16). But it is love only for those within the community, love for “our kind.” Those on the outside belong to the world; and says the author to his readers, “the world hates you” (3:13). Therefore, “do not love the world” (2:15).

The mindset of this letter is radically dualistic: They are the children of the devil; we are the children of God (3:10). They are murderers like Cain; we are righteous like his brother (3:12-15). Any of this sound familiar? Their deeds, born of hatred, are evil; our deeds, done in love, are good. Therefore, protect yourself from them and cling to one another.

There is no talk in I John of welcoming the stranger or forgiving the sinner or loving the enemy. You remember how Jesus, according to Matthew and Luke, asks “What’s the big deal about loving those who love you? Everybody does that!” But the author of this letter apparently didn’t have Mathew or Luke on his reading list. And there is no Golden Rule in I John. The implied message here is “Love your brothers and sisters, but do unto those others before they do it unto you.”

Does any of this sound familiar?

To be honest, I can understand why a small, marginalized community – the community of I John – would feel threatened by foes within and without, why its members would be tempted to think in terms of us and them. Such a way of thinking, however, is still hazardous to one’s spiritual health; and when this mindset is coupled with political, economic, and military power, it is hazardous to the health of the world!

Friends, we gather this weekend in Washington, not simply with strategies or programs that differ from the current administration, but with a different vision of life in human community.

This vision, if I’m not mistaken, far from splitting the world, insists that all life is interrelated. This means, among other things, that security is never won through unilateral defense but through attentiveness to the injustice that afflicts other children of God – and everyone is a child of God! That’s why support for the Millennium Development Goals would contribute more to our security than new weapons systems ever could. Dr. King, as usual, had it just right: “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is a nation approaching spiritual death” – because its priorities are fundamentally askew.

I realize, of course, that none of this makes any sense if you live by the logic of I John. According to that logic, “they” hate “us.” How can a willingness to risk living in diverse, interdependent community possibly make us more secure?! But isn’t it the vision of the prophets that justice is the basis of lasting security (see Isaiah 32 and Micah 4)? Isn’t it the vision of the apostle that the well-being of one depends on the well-being of all (see I Corinthians 12)? Isn’t this the gospel?!

This vision of interrelatedness certainly applies to the church. Like the author of I John, I deplore division in the body of Christ! I long for us to accept our gift of unity in Christ and to demonstrate a love for one another that will speak volumes to the world about the God who first loved us. But true community is never formed over against others. “Gated community” is an oxymoron. The Gospel calls us (empowers us) to see God’s image in those who are not in our image, to realize that God’s love binds us to people who do not look or think as we do – and thereby to bear witness to the One who loves not only us but even us.

It is this dualistic mindset, seen so clearly in I John, that leads to racial profiling, and other forms of discrimination, including the fearful response to persons who are gay or

lesbian. It is this mindset that leads to a willingness to care for “our own,” whoever they happen to be, while letting those others in Kenya or Eastern Congo or the lower Ninth Ward fall off our moral radar screens. It is this mindset that leads to a society of economic winners and losers with little recognition that “the neighbor” is anyone left by the side of the road.

And it is this dualistic mindset that leads persons, in the community of I John or contemporary America, to divide the world into those who are evil and those who are good. I am convinced, as I imagine you are, that evil is never more powerful than when we assume that it only resides elsewhere.

But of course, this cuts both ways. It is easy to point a finger at the President for the way he splits the world into opposing camps, urging us to recognize enemies that can only be destroyed as part of a divinely-ordained struggle between good and evil. Pointing at him alone, however, only repeats the problem. All of us want peace, and most of us (I suspect) decry this war. But, to be honest, we also want things that make for conflict, including a standard of living that contributes to the poverty of global neighbors.

If all we had were different strategies and programs, then we could indulge in the same rhetoric as the administration. But we gather here in Washington, not just with different strategies and programs, but with a different vision of life in human community; and this vision indicts the self-righteousness of the left no less than the arrogant dualism of the right.

I will admit that, in an era marked by crisis, I find the sharp-edged language of I John attractive and, in a sense, even appropriate. Take a stand against the war? Absolutely. Protest against policies that punish the poor and reward the rich! Absolutely. Protect the environment from those who seem incapable of thinking beyond their own immediate gain. Absolutely. Promote racial justice. Absolutely! Saying “yes” to our neighbors means saying an emphatic “no!” to all that excludes or diminishes them. But the vision we hold keeps us from saying that only others are guilty of hardness of heart and forces us to acknowledge our relationship with all of God’s children. There are many times when I wish God would be a bit more discriminating. But there it is: George Bush is my brother in Jesus Christ. That’s not the mindset of I John, but it is the mindset of the gospel.

Before ending, I want to say something positive about this text that our organizing committee chose for us to consider! And there is one very big plus: Love, according to the author of I John, is not just affection but action. If I say that I love George Bush, it doesn’t mean that I think sweet thoughts about him! It means that I act toward him the same way I act toward you: I pray for him and, if he is in need, I respond. Love, as described in our text, is an act of the will. No one can “fall in love” on command, but we can choose to be for the other as Christ has been for us.

By the way, an example of another way of thinking came during the White House briefing last week when the President supported his faith-based initiative by saying that

“Government can’t love.” No, the government can’t “fall in love” in the sense of affection; but those who govern can exercise love by acting on behalf of the vulnerable.

Remember our reading: “Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (3:18). Or as my daughters might put it: Talk is cheap! How can you say you love if you, having the world’s goods, see a brother or sister in need yet refuse to help (3:17)?

But here, too, there is a problem. The author of I John writes of active love in terms of sacrifice, following the example of Jesus. Verse 16: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we [therefore] ought to lay down our lives for one another.” Yes, sacrifice is a crucial Christian theme. The problem, however, is that historically certain groups – women, minorities – have been asked (expected!) to sacrifice far more than people who look like me. Perhaps it is time for us to emphasize not the imitation of Jesus’ death but the imitation of his life – welcoming strangers, forgiving sinners, loving enemies. In a culture so fixated on violence and death, surely it is time for us to lift up our vision of interdependent life – in this world, in all its fullness, for all God’s children.

I John! Why did it have to be I John?! As I hope is obvious, I love the Bible and try to put it at the center of my life. But there are times when our love of scripture call us to challenge parts of scripture in the name of its central theme – the gospel of God’s universal love made flesh in Jesus Christ.

In the same way, I love the United States of America. But there are times when we are called to challenge the basic direction – the basic vision – of this country in the name of this same gospel. Now is such a time! We gather here in Washington, not just with different strategies and programs, but with a different vision of life in human community. This vision is the gift and promise of the one gracious God – to whom be the glory for ever and ever.

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