

Overcoming the World

1 John 5:1-6

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

⁶ This 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.

Two songs come to mind when we hear our scripture this morning. The first is *We Shall Overcome*. The words are:

We shall overcome, we shall overcome,
We shall overcome someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall overcome someday.
The Lord will see us through, The Lord will see us through,
The Lord will see us through someday;
Oh, deep in my heart,
I do believe,
We shall overcome someday.

I had always thought of this as a justice song, one used in the civil rights movement, but in light of our scripture it becomes a song of affirmation that God has given us what we need in Jesus Christ to overcome whatever the world throws at us.

The other song is: "They'll know we are Christians by our love ... yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love." So runs the familiar refrain of Peter Schulte's 1966 hymn, composed at the height of one of the most tumultuous periods of U.S.

history and now sung worldwide. He set the lyrics to music quickly, in less than half a day, not only because he was moved by Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, and others involved in the civil rights movement. Quite likely, we might surmise, he was also deeply steeped in the words and worldview of 1 John.

Here at the conclusion of his letter John simply reiterates a key message: those who come from God love God and love others in God's name. "By this we shall know" them, he says midway through the letter, by the love the "children of God" enact through their faith "not in word or speech but in deed and in truth" (3:18, 19 RSV).

A white priest, Scholtes volunteered to lead a half-Irish, half-black parish on the South Side of Chicago. For him, love was not just a romantic notion spouted by theologians. It took on concrete daily meaning. He weathered protests of white parishioners when he and his associate hung a sign outside the church welcoming King on his first trip north. He offered a cup of coffee to King, taking him to the church basement where parish women knew all about accommodating those hungry and thirsty with tangible signs of God's love. He watched in disappointment as white congregants migrated out of the changing neighborhood. It is not too hard to imagine that the ministry of this congregation was emboldened by 1 John's mandate to "love the children of God" as they love the parent (vv. 1-2).

The author of 1 John does not offer details about what love actually looks like. He assumes we know God's commandments as summed up by Jesus and enacted in John's Gospel—healing the lame, feeding five thousand, sparing the woman caught in adultery, raising Lazarus. At the climax of the Last Supper, Jesus announced a "new commandment" in words 1 John picks up and repeats: "Little children, ... love one another. Just as I have loved you" (John 13:33-34; see also 15:12).

God's commandments are "not burdensome," he said (1 John 5:3). This certainly flies in the face of experience. Fighting racism and other "isms" of our

day in all their subtle forms seems especially difficult, despite progress made in the many years since Scholtes penned his verse. Sometimes we might admit that it seems easier to hate the neighbor whose dog yaps at all hours or the idiot who pulls out in front of us in heavy traffic. Putting up with the foibles of our most intimate family members day in and day out, whether crumbs on the counter or rude, mean, even violent treatment, is indeed a burden. In all actuality most Christians stand a long way off from restoring the loving "unity" about which Scholtes and the author of 1 John speak. Overcoming brokenness and evil is precisely what the author means when he said the faithful "conquer the world"—a hope he repeated three times in the last two verses (vv. 4-5).

Both 1 John and the Gospel of John liken Christian love to the love of those who "lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16; John 15:13). But we should not throw around the commandment to love without recognizing valid criticism of the ideal of self-sacrifice in the last several decades. Black liberation and womanist theologians have pointed out the historic misuse of Christ's images of suffering and servanthood in the continued exploitation of people of color, women, the poor... Feminists have identified the dangers of teaching self-sacrifice to women already over-programmed to submit to their husbands unquestioningly, or to children at the mercy of abusive parents, compelled to remain in dangerous contexts by mandates to follow Christ. In popular books like *The Giving Tree* we are too quick to proclaim self-sacrifice as the epitome. They distort the radical mutuality required of genuine Christian love. Too often suffering, sacrifice, and death become the focus in a way never intended by authors addressing those with the power and capacity to give of themselves.

So how exactly is fulfilling God's commandments not burdensome or exploitative? The first verse of this passage states the answer in plain terms: "everyone who believes Jesus is the Christ" is welcomed into the community—

indeed is "born" into the family (v. 4)—where love flows freely. The love we give is simply the love we have first received, as children receive life from and give life to parents. Love is a birthright of faith. Faith "conquers" the dross and drag of this world. When love arrives it comes as gift and grace. Genuine love is invited, not forced, motivated by faithfulness rather than fear, and leads to more just and loving relationships. **Bonnie J. Miller-Mclemore**

First Epistle of John is about faith, love, endurance, overcoming the world and obedience, all centered in Jesus Christ. The God we love has a child, the Son, Jesus. God and child come together. Love of the one will draw you inextricably toward love of the other. Loving God is inseparably bound to believing that Jesus is the Messiah and the begotten of God. But loving God also entails loving God's other children. John binds together faith in Jesus, love of God, love of one another, and obedience to God. This binding reminds us of the words of Jesus that echo the great Shema, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart ... soul ... mind, and ... strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:29-31).

The Son is begotten of the Father; so too are we born from above by the Spirit. We are begotten through faith and we participate in the ongoing life of Jesus in the world through the Spirit. The Son continues to overcome the world in us and through us. We must remember that Jesus announced his overcoming of the world as he was heading to torture and death (John 16:33). This Christ pattern marks us. We too overcome. Our overcoming is not a detour around opposition, controversy, violence, and even death. It is a faithful character formed through careful listening to the Spirit while we are in the crucible of trouble. **Willie James Jennings**

In a congregation one writer attended years ago, an elder uttered the same prayer whenever her turn came to pray at the communion table. "Let us love one another," she intoned, "as God has first loved us." This was no hollow preaching

on her part. Like Scholtes, she had come to embody the words of this passage "walking hand in hand," "working side by side," and "spreading the news that God is in our land." **Bonnie J. Miller-Mclemore**

Just as God gave Jesus the ability to overcome the world – so God has given us those same abilities in Christ.

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