

Sermon Notes: April 14, 2024

Focus: John and Gnosticism

Lectionary: [Easter 3, Year B](#)

1 John 3:2-3 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

I relish this passage. It is about revelation, love and relationship. It encourages us to find our calling in the revealed Christ. It calls us to be patient on the journey and sets our hope on a world bigger than us. And it would be great on a greeting card, if we left it at that. But, there are specific things this passage and letter are trying to address: DIY spirituality. In the first century, DIY was Gnosticism, which I will discuss in a moment.

Basics of John

There are five books associated with John. Obviously, there is the Gospel of John. There are three epistles: 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John. Finally, there is the Book of Revelation. Most academics think the Gospel of John is the last canonical Gospel written. Be careful - dating ancient manuscripts is a fuzzy science at best. The Gospel of John's started circulating 90 years after Jesus' death and would be updated and revised over the next 20 years. 1, 2, and 3 John as well as Revelation were written roughly 10 years after the Gospel. And, be very careful of authorship. In line with academic thought, I will try to refrain from calling the author, "John" and instead refer to them as "the elder(s)." We really don't know early authorship well.

I would like to think of the 1, 2 and 3 John as well as Revelation as course corrections to Jesus' original teachings. Their culture was full of DIY paths to find secret wisdom in order to elevate oneself above the dirt and muck of day-to-day life. The elder was squaring off against "Gnosticism." Their opposition to DIY was a reminder to the believers to turn to Jesus. There they will find comfort in the face of crushing imperial oppression.

Dictionary definition of Gnosticism (nos-tuh-siz-uhm)

A group of ancient practices, stressing transcendence from this world through the acquisition of esoteric knowledge.

Gnostics

What is a Gnostic in practice you ask? There were a garden variety of Gnostic teachings in the Roman Empire in the first century that I won't go into. Basically, gnosticism teaches you how to escape pain by disconnecting from the world and

finding secret, hidden wisdom. That gnosis is discovered by those who are brave enough to go inward. The body, food, sex, work are irrelevant to your divine inner light.

We as modern westerners are so gnostic, escapist, and individualistic that it does not even register that we might have our own esoteric beliefs. We believe we are strong enough to rise above the day-to-day challenges of life without any help outside of us. How many times has someone said a version of “I am spiritual but not religious?” That is a kind of gnosticism.

I am pretty gnostic too, if you let Webster's definition be a little more updated. I had 20 years of iron fisted orthodoxy crammed down my throat, and I am never going back. I enjoy the freedom to explore my interior life without someone always beating me about the shoulders with canons and creeds. I have learned from wandering all over the religious map that there is not some secret gnosis that will solve all my problems.

Remember the dictionary definition of gnosticism where we transcend this world through our own effort to find the strength of knowledge? Most of us are not attracted to kundalini and third eyes, but we do think we are pretty special and uniquely qualified to handle our lives.

Too much of anything

None of us should be left to our own devices. God did not make us completely autonomous -we are not enough on our own. We are better together. The elder wants us to remember that there is no escape from life, only turning to a relationship with God. There is no secret except love.

Hopefully we can decide against whatever DIY life we have concocted in order to seek Jesus' revelation. Jesus says “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” That is a constraint we can willingly take on.

Tradition and Heart

Too much transcendence gnosticism: you never go anywhere but your navel. Too much iron fisted religiosity: you're too busy being ‘good’ and telling others to be good that you neglect your heart and spirit. Remember the elder's medicine for both poisons:

When he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Todd