

## Confident Love

### 1 John 3:11-24

<sup>11</sup> For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. <sup>12</sup> We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. <sup>13</sup> Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you. <sup>14</sup> We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. <sup>15</sup> All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. <sup>16</sup> We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. <sup>17</sup> 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 help?

<sup>18</sup> Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. <sup>19</sup> And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him <sup>20</sup> whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. <sup>21</sup> Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; <sup>22</sup> and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

<sup>23</sup> And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. <sup>24</sup> All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

### Theme Statement

The community that gathers around the preacher of 1 John is troubled by two important questions: “What is our identity? And how do we know?” The answer: We abide in Jesus, who taught us to love in truth and action.

### Exploring the Word

*When we read through 1 John, we might think we are listening to a well-delivered sermon. These five chapters don't seem to be a letter. They don't even begin with a salutation. Instead we might think of them as a preacher's proclamation.*

#### 1 John 3:11-15 Abiding in death

This section of the sermon of 1 John is focused on the difference between loving one another, on the one hand, and deciding to abide in death, on the other. Cain is held up as an example of someone who chose death. His story of anger, jealousy, and murder is told in Genesis 4:1-16.

The preacher of 1 John shares the good news that those who remain in the church are choosing life, as evidenced by their love for one another. That is their identity. They are not haters. Hatred breeds contempt, which leads to abiding in death. Haters have turned from God and don't enjoy *Emmanuel*, God with them, right then, right now and forever.

#### 1 John 3:16-20 Knowing through love

“We know love by this” are the words that introduce these five verses. *Know* is a key word here. There had been a conflict in the house church to which this sermon is delivered, and one group had left. The conflict was about the very nature of Christ. That is a serious conflict indeed. We don't know all the forms this disagreement took, but it seems to have had hurtful components.

One group, the Docetists, claimed access to secret knowledge that Jesus was made of spiritual matter and did not have a physical body. The group on the other side of the conflict believed that Jesus was God's Son in flesh and blood and spirit.

The “flesh, blood, and spirit” side of the argument had won. The group that believed in a spiritual, fleshless Jesus left. The question for the group remaining in the house church was, “Can we be confident that we were right about Jesus? How do we know?”

The preacher answered these questions plainly. He declared that they knew that a flesh-and-spirit Jesus loved them, because he died—physically died—for them. Their identity was shaped by loving the people in their community as Jesus loved them.

#### 1 John 3: 21-24 Acting boldly

The preacher continued by encouraging the house church to boldly ask for whatever they wanted. The words are reminiscent of Jesus' words “Ask, and it will be given you” (Matthew 7:7). What did this mean to the bruised but faithful people remaining after the Docetists had left? It seems they were being reassured that they did not need to remain beaten down by the church fight. Instead they could have confidence that they were “beloved,” a word derived from *agape*, the Greek word that characterizes

God's unconditional love. As the beloved, they could be bold before God, "if our hearts do not condemn us" (v. 21). How would they know they were not condemned? "Because," wrote this leader, "we obey [God's] commandments and do what pleases him" (v. 22). That meant believing in Jesus the Christ and loving one another. These were hopeful words.

## The Word Today

Questions of identity challenge the church's unity in our time too.

One Sunday our intern pastor was preaching about a group of people who are the target of hate crimes. Suddenly, in the middle of her sermon, someone shouted out a demeaning epithet about a targeted group. Intern Jessica responded calmly. She acknowledged that there are many responses to hate-filled discrimination, but we are called to love each other without exception. An occasional worshiper with us, the man who had yelled out was now quiet. Several people shared the peace with him before communion, but he stayed in his seat as Jesus' body and blood were shared. The next Sunday he was back. He's still with us many Sundays and chooses to listen and watch from outside rather than inside the worship space.

My Quaker friend told me about a problem they are having in their meeting for worship on Sunday mornings. A few new people have been joining them and are returning time and time again. They express gratitude for the quiet, Spirit-filled worship they experience. But they aren't interested in studying the doctrines of the Religious Society of Friends. Those in leadership roles wonder, Is it appropriate to allow the visitors to be there? What if they tell

others about their worship experience, but don't accurately state the doctrine of the Religious Society of Friends?

The people in the second-century congregation that had assembled around the Gospel of John faced a similar problem. As disciples of Jesus, did they find their identity in the fourth gospel, or was their identity expressed by those in the docetic movement? We can guess that the dialogue wasn't always pretty. The docetic group left the congregation, while the group following the Gospel of John stayed. Those who stayed apparently weren't confident about their beliefs. Those beliefs were their identity.

If we establish our identities over against the identities of other people, we are in trouble. If we build our identities as Jesus' followers, we love God, our neighbors, and ourselves deeply. We are not asked to agree to false ideas just to "keep the peace." We are called to truth and action, loving each other no matter who or what.

What would you do about the visitors at the Quaker meeting for worship? And about the man who shouted out a hateful epithet? Your identity as God's child will give you the confidence to make bold decisions.

## Questions for Discussion

### Beginnings

1. Are there people in your extended family or circle of friends who are difficult to be around because their ideas and agendas differ markedly from yours? How do you respond to those who don't agree with you?

## Exploring the Word

1. What do you think life was like in the 1 John house church? Check all that apply.

The congregation was . . .

- quiet, now that difficult “nonbelievers” had left.
  - full of fear about what would happen next.
  - filled with confidence, because they knew that the crucified and risen Jesus loved them.
  - full of love for everyone.
  - full of anger for the troublemakers.
2. Do you think the preacher’s use of the story of Cain in his sermon was helpful for his community? If so, why? If not, what story might you have chosen?
  3. Review verses 16-20 and identify at least three ways that, according to the preacher, the community might know Jesus and his love for those who remained in the congregation. Did these truths apply to the group that left?
  4. Put yourself in the place of the people in this house church in Ephesus in the first century CE. What things do you need or want to ask God for? What things would it be a mistake to request from God?

## The Word Today

1. Consider your identity as a follower of Jesus and rank the following descriptions according to how confident you feel about that part of your identity (1 = most confident, 5 = least confident).
- I am someone who can tell others about Jesus.
  - I am someone who loves everyone.
  - I am a praying person.

I am a follower of Jesus.

I am the kind of person to have around in times of trouble.

2. Do you know that God loves you deeply and forgives you? How do you know that? Are you usually confident about God’s love and forgiveness?

## Closing Prayer

*God who is love, support us as we love one another. In your Son’s name we pray. Amen.*

## Further Study

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; John 17:20-24

## Daily Readings

M. 1 Thessalonians 2:1-10

F. 3 John 1-4

T. Ephesians 5:8-16

S. 3 John 9-12

W. John 3:16-21

S. 1 John 3:11-24

T. 1 John 2:28-3:10

## Memorization

### 1 John 3:23

And this is [God’s] commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.