

SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota

1 John 4:1-6
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
 August 5, 2018

KIDS' MESSAGE - How can God see and care about Planet Earth and all of the people from so far away? God in Jesus has come from Heaven to Earth, to Christmas, to baby, to cross, to resurrection, to baptism, to Holy Spirit, to the hearts and lives of you and of your neighbor. God is here with us, in us. Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

I heard it on MPR news this week. Pope Francis reversed centuries of Roman Catholic teaching regarding the death penalty. The pope declared the death penalty to be contrary to God's will because:

1. It doesn't allow for the accused to repent and receive forgiveness.
2. It devalues human life.

Our **ELCA** has a social statement, voted on by our people that also opposes the death penalty. So does the state of **Minnesota**. On the same news broadcast, it was reported that an 18-year-old boy threw an 8-year-old boy off a 31-foot tall waterslide down by the Cities. It was later reported that the 18 year old has a history of mental illness. **What is human life worth?**

Jesus' disciple, John, or one of his followers wrote the letter containing our text for today. It was written to early Christians who had been badly persecuted by both Jews and Romans. Those Christians had been decimated by jails, crosses, gladiators and lions. In many ways, their world looked extremely bleak and perhaps hopeless. In the face of all of this, they must have **questioned whether God had really come in Christ** to give life and salvation. Maybe it was a **hoax**?

During this time, close to the end of the first century, many philosophers were questioning who Jesus was. Was Jesus human? Divine? If Jesus was God, how could he have died? Gods don't die. A new cult arose called **Gnosticism**, after the Greek word for **knowledge**. The leaders of this cult taught that **Jesus was not God**. They saw the human body as intrinsically evil so a **pure God** couldn't become a **sinful human**. They claimed that Jesus was never human, maybe a phantom, a temporary appearance of God who only looked human. Others said

God only descended upon Jesus at his baptism and left him before his death. Gnostics believed that our **salvation comes through our minds/souls connecting with God**. Since our **bodies** were totally evil, it didn't matter what we did with them. Consequently, the Gnostics cared little about **morality**, how they treated others or the creation. **Many Christians today still live as if Jesus doesn't care how we treat other people.**

A couple of weeks ago, the first verse of John's letter was read in worship here. He started this letter by saying, **"We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us. . ."** John, one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus here confirms that he himself **heard, saw and touched Jesus in the flesh**. John's letter and our ancient **Apostles' Creed** (800 A.D.) agree that Jesus was **both human** - born of Mary, **and divine** – conceived by the Holy Spirit. We gather today in a centuries-long line of Christians who believe that Jesus is both **God** and **human** like us.

"Well," you might ask, **"this argument was settled by the church centuries ago, why do we have to talk about it today?"** John's warning is just as appropriate and needed today as it was two thousand years ago. We have leaders who are **trying to convince us that God is not moving in our world, that God doesn't care how we treat each other or this amazing creation we live in.**

John, in today's text, warns that there are false prophets/teachers in our world. He encourages us to **"test the spirits"** to see whether they are from God. John goes on, **"By this you know the Spirit of God, every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God."** John then speaks of the **"anti-Christ"** as being the one moving in the world who claims that Jesus was not God.

"Little children," John speaks lovingly to Jesus' followers, **"you are from God, and have conquered them; (the anti-Christ deniers of Jesus' divinity) for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."** **News flash, rag-tag little band of Christians**, since your baptism, the Holy Spirit of God dwells in you,

has claimed you as a child of God and will never leave or give up on you. No matter what this self-centered world throws at you, God in Christ is faithful and is present to give you and all people life – even in the face of death! God dwells in you and me and **expects each of us to make a Godly difference** in Aitkin, Minnesota, the USA and planet Earth.

When Jesus/God came into this world, he crushed the lie that says that human beings aren't worth very much, that they are expendable, that we only need to take care of ourselves. . . Jesus/God intimately knows this creation, every person, every hair on our heads, our hopes and dreams, our wants and our needs, our suffering and doubts. God is here with us, in the flesh and in the Spirit.

It happened at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. I was attending a workshop focused on the connection between faith and science. **Lynn Kellerman**, from our congregation, was also there. One morning as Lynn and I sat in chapel for worship, I spotted a young couple seated two rows ahead of me. The thirty-something woman had purple tinged hair and the fellow sported a purple mohawk. Then I spotted the bouncing head and hands of a little boy with profound physical/facial disfigurement. He was being held and cared for by them. They lovingly passed him back and forth attending to his every need. The little boy was black and they were white. He must be adopted, I reasoned. They must have chosen to care for him, to bring him to be a part of God's family. We were about to have Holy Communion. I watched as the pastor lifted up the communion bread and spoke these words, **"This is my body given for you."** The bread, as I watched, came to rest directly over the head of this little boy whose future was so bleak, but who obviously was so loved. Loved by parents. And loved by God.

It struck me then, in that brief moment, perhaps more so than ever before. **God in Christ has come into this world to love, save and care for this little boy.** And God in Christ has come into this world to care for his less-than-orthodox, seminary student parents. And to love, save and care for the little kids who have been separated from their parents on our border, and the little kids who are neglected in our own town, and the little kids who are growing up in places where random shots take innocent lives, and the kids in Africa, Asia, Palestine, Syria . . .

During that service, I watched as those two parents, having taken on such a huge responsibility, squeezed and kissed, hugged and comforted that little person. And I thought, **“That’s how Jesus feels about him too.”** Lynn and I walked up to the Mohawk dad in the narthex after the service. Lynn spoke a kind and loving greeting to that little, two or three-year-old in his arms. **“Jaeden can’t hear since we don’t have his hearing aids in,”** the father said. **“But through his little, squinting eyes, he can see you.”** And maybe he can see Jesus. And I know Jesus can see him. And I thank Jesus for giving him his big-hearted parents.

Our world is so full of hatred, lies, judgment and division. God in Christ has come to forgive, heal, make new and empower **every person** for abundant life. Jesus came to give us faith, hope and love. Jesus came to bring peace and justice.

John writes to the first century Christians, and to us, **“Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; (the people who speak and act like God has not come here to love, die for and save every person) for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”**

If Jesus is the Son of Mary and of God, and if Jesus claimed us as children of God, his sisters and brothers, then whether it be gladiators or lions, whether it be violence or hatred – **we do not face them alone. Our God is greater than any evil in this world.**

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus taught us to say, **“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.”** He wasn’t just talking about spiritual things. Jesus came to turn this world upside down and bring it closer to God. **Jesus is Lord** and **Caesar is not**. I learned recently that the word, **“political”** comes from the Greek and means, **“being active in the public square for the common good.”** If that is true, **“active in the public square for the common good,”** we don’t need less politicians. We need more politicians. We all need to be politicians.

I saw some street signs posted in the neighborhood around the seminary. One said, **“Drive like your kids live here.”** Maybe our church should have a sign by the exit, **“Live like everybody out there is your family.”** **“Live like everybody out there is your family.”** That’s what God wants. Thanks be to God. Amen.

