

Sixth Sunday of Easter – Epistle

GROWING UP

1 John 5:1-6

Sixth Sunday in Easter

Analysis by Jerome Burce

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.

Preface:

Consider...

- the astounding ability of the letter-set “LCMS” to produce snorts of contempt when uttered in a gathering of ELCA pastors. (Vice versa too, I’ll bet.)
- that one of the colleagues I most respect in the ELCA synod I belong to is paid by that synod to mediate congregational conflict. (He keeps very, very busy.)
- the young man at the gas station who, spotting my clerical

collar, asked a) if I was a priest, and b) if I was a Christian (which caused me quietly to despise him as one of those errant, obnoxious evangelicals).

DIAGNOSIS: “Nag, Nag, Nag!”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Gripping

After four Sundays-now five-of listening to this letter, it's finally sinking in: the author really means it when he keeps calling us “little children” (2:1, 12, 28; 3:18; 4:4). Isn't that how he's treating us? I mean, the same old spiel (more or less) week after week in the same old words and phrases- “believe,” “love,” “love of God,” “commandments,” and of course “OBEY”-as if we didn't hear him the first time; as if the preacher hasn't long since shot his bolt on whatever hot and urgent applications he had in mind when he girded his loins and dutifully waded into 1 John way back on Easter 2. Come now. Does the author-worse, the Spirit behind the author-really think we're that thick? That deaf? That woefully immature?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Ignoring

Ah, but our beefing gives us away, doesn't it? I (the present writer) have fathered four children to the edge of adulthood and beyond. Along the way I've had ample opportunity to get the hang of two basic rules of sinners' behavior. One: children ignore first. Only then do parents start repeating. Two: the more the kids bluster about having heard it all before, the less they're inclined to take dad's point to heart. This is particularly so when the point dad wants to slip across has to do with the way they're treating each other-as if the other were not also a human being in whom dad had a particular and profound investment. Why then is God, via 1 John, going over and over the same old thing if not precisely because, like naughty children,

we don't want to take his word and counsel to heart? Indeed we do regard his two basic commandments (believe in Jesus' name; love one another, 3:23) as burdensome (v. 3b) and we wish he'd shut up about them. So what if so-and-so manifestly believes "that Jesus is the Christ"? Is that in itself sufficient reason to honor and treat her as one "born of God" (v. 1)? Not if standard Christian behavior be our guide. See the examples above.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Losing*

In homes where love and wisdom rule, the contest between repetitious parents and studiously ignoring children will always end with the parents saying "I win." Shall God settle for less when the eternal welfare of all his children is at stake? If the standards and habits by which we assess and treat each other are not of God-again, the one who believes Jesus to be Christ is born of God; the one who loves the parent also loves the child (v.1)-then those standards and habits (e.g., 2:16) are of the world, engendered by antichrist, the world's spirit (4:3). Do we not get it? God "conquers the world" (v. 4, fragment), and "destroy[s] the works of the devil" (2:8). Antichrist loses, big-time. Woe to the stubborn, grizzling child who insists to the last on hanging with that crowd!

PROGNOSIS: "Father, May I?"

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Conquering*

Enter Christ, that Son in whom the rest of us are children. By water he came (v. 6; I suggest the allusion is to the Johannine account of Jesus' baptism where the Baptist declares Jesus to be Lamb of God (John 1:29). He came also by blood (v. 6). Where, into what did he come? To his messianic reign; into recognition as the sin-removing Lamb, as Christ, as Son of God. The blood that brings him there is his own. Note well when he sheds it: in that precise moment when people, saying they have not sinned,

call him a liar (1:10) and crucify him for it, thereby turning him into the atoning sacrifice “for the sins of the whole world,” their own sins included (2:2); spilling the blood that “cleanses us from all unrighteousness,” not least the unrighteousness of naughty children who ignore God’s repeated plea that they love each other. Thus by water and blood is the world overcome. For how, in Jesus’ name, can anyone any longer credit the world’s claims about how this, that, or the other person and/or group is beyond God’s loving? And why should I fear the world’s whisper that my own willful brattiness may already have thrust me beyond God’s forgiving?

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Tuning In*

Could it be that news this good will finally grab my attention? Might it happen that in my umpteenth preaching of it someone else will at last take notice? Why not? What else does God have in mind through this steady repetition-same old, same old-if not at length to sink it past our consciousness and into our hearts where he wants to see it? Where it will strike us as something fresh, and sweet, and gladly to be believed? Why else is the Spirit suddenly involved as co-testator in today’s repetition (v. 6, 7) if not to call, enlighten and sanctify (Small Catechism) a dumb, boneheaded kid or two through a sudden “I get it! Tell me more!” Tell me more, for example, about how ridiculously light and un-burdensome those commandments really are. Merely that I recognize reality, for one (i.e., the reality of God’s love for me in Jesus, Son and Christ); merely that I acknowledge, for another, how reality for me is reality also for the guy in the pew behind me-and to act with him accordingly.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Emulating*

And this, of course, is the very point at which griping ceases and children grow up. Call them little no longer. The Father’s agenda is becoming their agenda, his pleasure their pleasure, his love their love. Which means that they, getting it, become

for the sake of the other kids a kind of instant playback machine, endlessly running that little bit of tape with the Father's few and infinitely precious words, not merely spoken but enacted "in deed and in truth" (3:18, RSV). This, come to think of it, is love; that with God-for the love of God-we continue gently yet tenaciously, over and over, to pass along the wonder of all that comes from nothing more than simple faith in Jesus. One more time: "Everyone that believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God" (v. 1) and "conquers the world" (v. 4-5). Fancy that! Don't you just love it? The God behind it? The sister or brother for whom also it's eternally true?