

## **“Imitate what is good...”**

Psalm 19:7-10; 3 John 1

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For most of you, this is probably the first time you’ve heard a sermon on 3<sup>rd</sup> John. But I learned this week that Dave and Paula *have* heard a sermon on this little book, way back in 1991. At the funeral for Dave’s Grandma Clara, verse 4 was the theme: “I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” I understand that it was a perfect expression of who she was, of her faith in Christ, and of her love and hopes for her family. In a quite-different context, Grandma Clara’s life reflected the very same sentiment as the unnamed elder who wrote this little letter: joy of passing on the faith and seeing it take root in the next generations.

We can understand that, and we also can understand and relate to the personal tone of this letter – one of only a couple of Biblical writings that are distinctly personal communications rather than what we might call “open letters,” obviously intended to be circulated among the churches.

But there is a lot we *don’t* know about 3<sup>rd</sup> John, and some of the questions we might want to ask don’t have definitive answers. To begin with, who *was* this Elder, the sender of this letter? Was he the same person who wrote the letters we call 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> John (or one of them), or the Gospel of John, or Revelation? All of those books seem (because of various points of connection between them) to have been composed and circulated within the same branch of the early church. Beginning in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, these writings came to be associated with the John who was one of Jesus’ disciples, and that tradition kind of stuck, though the actual evidence for it is scanty. (Only the writer of Revelation includes his name, but nothing that identifies himself with John the disciple.) Most scholars don’t think the same person wrote all of them.

All we can say for sure is that the Elder, the writer of this letter, is someone who has a relationship with Gaius and the church Gaius is part of, and that that relationship is one of nurturing or authority of some kind – maybe a formal role or maybe simply that of a wise and caring mentor.

We don’t know anything about Gaius either, what his role was in his church, or much about that church – where it was, what mix of people were part of it, or about the “brothers and sisters” who visited by weren’t welcomed by everyone. Nor do we know everything about Diotrephes’ position or motives (more on that later) or who Demetrius (mentioned in passing at the end) might have been – maybe the messenger who delivered the letter?

We only know the little bit the letter writer tells us about how a visit from some out-of-town Christians seems to have revealed a division – a power struggle, perhaps - within this congregation.

A commentator I read observed that reading some of the letters in the New Testament is kind of like hearing one side of a conversation. We have to read between the lines, and sometimes use a bit of imagination to infer what was happening in the lives of the people on the receiving end. Like the other epistles, this one is addressing a specific situation... one that the people involved with were aware of. We don't have all the details, though, so we can't be sure exactly what went on.

By now you might be wondering why this book is in the Bible at all. It doesn't seem to have been intended to be widely shared among the churches. It doesn't have a sustained theological argument. It doesn't say very much about Jesus. It very clearly centers around one situation within one particular group of Christians ... and it doesn't paint the church in an entirely positive light. So... why is it here?

The technical answer to that question is, probably, that as the books we call the New Testament gradually came together into a scriptural canon, this writing was part of this little group of three letters believed to be by the disciple John or someone else considered to be an apostle – and for that reason was accorded authoritative status.

But it may be more useful to frame the question differently: why should we bother to read it, or pay any attention to it?

The more I read the epistles, the more I feel that the real gift they give us is an opportunity to glimpse the life of the early churches. We learn from the epistles that these communities were different: they existed in different places and were part of, surrounded with or affected by different cultures. We also learn about the diversity within some of these communities. We see in the epistles a time when Christianity was still in a formative stage. Christian believers were trying to figure out what Jesus' life and death meant and how to articulate what they believed. Theology was still developing. Even the four Gospels didn't yet exist as we know them. The church wasn't yet an institution, and questions of how things would be decided and done weren't settled. There were various opinions on these things, as well as about appropriate behavior for Jesus' followers.

And we witness, in the epistles, the fact that the early Christians had conflicts, and struggles over leadership, and even, on occasion, people behaving badly and in ways that explicitly or implicitly undermined the gospel.

This is really important because sometimes today we idealize this early church period. Sometimes we are urged, or feel the urge, to try and "get back to" the ways of the early church. The idea is that the church today will be more truly the "real", pure church if we imitate as much as possible the life of the early church.

Reading the epistles shows us that vision of a golden age of Church isn't based in reality. Like churches throughout history, the early churches were diverse, made up of people trying to figure out how to be faithful (sometimes succeeding, sometimes stumbling), and people with selfish motives and sometimes destructive behaviors. The early Christians had struggles, conflicts, and ways of doing things that reflected their times and places and circumstances. The epistles give us clues about all that – albeit clues found in one side of a conversation.

We don't know the whole story of what happened in this one church. We don't know who the "brothers and sisters" Gaius (and perhaps others) hosted were – probably traveling missionaries who counted on Christian believers for food and lodging as they went from town to town preaching the gospel. We don't know why Diotrephes was against welcoming them. Did he have theological differences with them? Did he see them as representatives of this Elder whose authority he doesn't recognize? Or perhaps as threats to his own position of leadership in the church? Is he just suspicious of "outsiders" or unwilling to make an effort for strangers? According to the Elder, Diotrephes is somebody who wants to put himself first all the time.

Maybe if we had Diotrephes' side of the story, he'd have reasons that seem good to him. But whatever the reason, the result was – almost – a failure of the hospitality and welcome that's supposed to be characteristic of the church. Instead of celebrating and honoring and strengthening the bonds of connection that are meant to unite those who follow Jesus, Diotrephes chose to reject those connections. And he had enough influence in the community that he managed to intimidate others into joining him.

But not everyone. Not Gaius, and presumably others who helped him to offer hospitality to their guests, some of whom have reported back to the Elder about how loving and generous that hospitality was, and how much faithfulness they saw in Gaius. It can be hard to go against peer pressure, especially when it's pressure to stick with your group against a stranger, or a bunch of strangers. So it's no wonder that the Elder praises Gaius's faithfulness. It *is* praiseworthy.

It's worth noticing that this letter isn't very much about theology or beliefs. (It's pretty different from Paul's letters, for example, in that regard.) The word "truth" is used several times in these few verses, but that's not about doctrinal truth. The "truth" in these letters (and the Gospel of John) refers to Jesus. To walk in the truth is to follow Jesus. To be coworkers with the truth is to take part in Jesus' mission in the world. The focus is on *lived* faith. The kind of faith you learn as you practice it. The kind of faith you learn from others who walk in the truth and embody the love of Jesus.

"Imitate what is good," the elder writes to Gaius. Not what's evil. No matter who's doing it. No matter what they say. Integrity, loving actions, faithfulness, caring for the community are the trustworthy indicators of God's presence, of love for Jesus. I think you can probably hear echoes of Jesus words from the Gospel of John, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15) And this, from the first letter of John: "Little children, let us love not in word or speech, but in deed and truth." (1 John 3:18) There are a lot of differences between these books,

but it's not hard to see why they belong to the same stream of the early Christian movement. They share this deep conviction that the only real faith is *lived* faith, and that lived faith is characterized by love.

I hope that conviction eventually won the day in the church of Gaius and Diotrephes. I'd like to think so. Maybe the time came when they were able, as a community together, to welcome strangers gladly and lovingly, eager to forge connections and do the work of Jesus together in the world. I kind of wish there were another letter, to tell us more! But there is the fact that this little letter has survived and even become part of our scriptures. Maybe that in itself is reason to believe that this community *did* learn to walk in the truth and imitate what is good- that is, to follow Jesus and live their faith. Because somebody passed on this letter and the story inside it and the faith behind it. And doesn't that have to mean that there continued to be, in that place, people who lived the faith, and walked in the truth? Thanks be to God, for all those people, those before us, those beside us, and those who will come after us.

Amen.