

## **With Water and Blood**

Psalm 98  
I John 5:1-6

Our passage from John's first letter to the church contains two ideas that may need explaining. The first is the seeming tension between faith and works. The second is that Jesus “came by water and blood”. We will explain each in turn. But first, a reminder about who wrote this letter and why.

Virtually every biblical scholar throughout the years has agreed that the same man wrote the Gospel of John, plus I and II John. Their vocabulary, their word choices are not only identical, but they vary considerably from any other New Testament book. They are distinctive. They share the same major themes, which again vary from the rest of the canon. One of those themes appears in our passage, I John 5:2: “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commands.” That refers to the tension between faith and works, which we will address in just a moment. But why did John write this letter? Its introduction in the New Oxford Annotated Bible states, “This letter has a two-fold purpose: to deepen the spiritual life of its readers, and to correct the heretical views of certain...teachers...”

John wrote to encourage Christians in their faith, and to correct false teachings. One of those false teachings remains alive and well today: that we satisfy God by

obeying God's commandments. Spoiler alert: we cannot satisfy God. We can only confess our sins and rely on God's mercy. I John and its neighbor in the Bible James both emphasize the necessity of “works”, of obedience to the commandments. But both also make sure to add that our faith saves, while works flow out of us in gratitude *for our already having been saved*. We obey out of gratitude. Martin Luther and John Calvin, the two giants of the Reformation, agreed. Salvation comes to us by faith through grace. God graciously offers us the gift of faith. When we accept it, when we do truly believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, we enter into a saving relationship with God. From that platform we do our best to obey God's commandments. We fail—all the time—yet God accepts us graciously.

Scholar Glen Barker sees three crucial responses we must make in return for the grace of God. He lists faith, love and obedience, in that order. First comes faith, that gift from God. Only when we have entered into a faithful relationship with God can we love with even a faith shadow of the love God has for us. And that love inspires us to obey God as we can. To return to the false teaching, many people have it exactly backwards. We cannot obey in order to earn God's love. No, we accept God's gift of faith, which infuses us with love for God and for humanity. This in turn empowers us better to obey God. Writer Max Lucado has illustrated this sequence by referring to first-time parents. “You cannot fully explain to childless people what it's like having a baby,” he writes. “But the fact of the matter is having that first baby is one of the most faith-dependent actions we can take in life. We do not know what it will entail, yet we somehow believe we can do it. And then we do. And we love that child

*instantly*, and we strive until they leave our home to model for them the right way to live. Somehow we know that is how we must do it.”

Faith. Love. Obedience. True love (John uses the Greek word *agape* here, meaning unselfish abiding love) requires action. True love requires *expression, works*. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we obey God's commands. I know a family that attends another church in town. Grandma and Grandpa are raising two grandchildren. Their father resides in the federal penitentiary; their mother wanders in and out of their lives. One of the cousins got sentenced this week to thirty years for shooting two men in a drug deal that turned sour. The two grandchildren are decent, smart, do not get into trouble at school. I know the grandson best. I call him Mr. Mayor, because every other student and the staff at probably the largest elementary school between Indianapolis and St. Louis all know him. He is cheerful, optimistic. How does a child grow up like that in that atmosphere?

His grandparents actively participate in their church. They honestly believe in God. They love their grandchildren. And they see their second round of parenting as a calling from God. Faith. Love. Obedience. Nobody would blame them if they kept a little distance between themselves, their broken daughter and her two children. They had already put in their time. Talking with the grandmother I have come to see how deeply she feels that God intends for her and her husband to take on this *work*. Faith leads to works. Through love. And because they are trying to obey God's call upon their lives two precious, young lives are being given a shot at turning into

happy, educated, productive, *loving* human beings.

Now to the “blood and water” phrase. John clearly intends this as a reference to baptism and communion. The waters of baptism signify cleansing from sin. We witnessed our granddaughter, Ayla's, baptism last Sunday. It was a warm, wonderful experience. The Roman Catholic priest explained that baptism is an outward and visible sign of God's love. And the whole ceremony certainly felt that way. The water symbolically washed our granddaughter clean and it was marvelous. The blood refers to what Jesus shed on the cross out of love for us. He had faith in his Father's plan, that his excruciating death would not mark the end, but only the middle of his journey. Since Tertullian, about 200 years after Christ, scholars have noted that while Jesus hung on the cross, a Roman soldier pierced his side with a spear and blood and water came out. As we take communion today, remember that the cup represents Jesus' own blood. He had faith. He loved us. He obeyed God.

Faith. Love. Obedience. That same sequence remains in force for us today. We have recently hit the theme of the church's decline pretty hard. Today, we need to speak to the other, positive side of that coin. We in the church have things that people in our society desperately long for. We have *communion*. While many in our community are surrounded by extended family and life-long friends, many more are not. We have it, and we do a good job of extending it to new folks. Linda and I can attest to that. We also have something writer Jonathan Haidt has recently written about. We will dive into his observations much more fully in an upcoming sermon, but

for today let us just say that he has noted a strong correlation between church participation and good mental health. We offer a whole menu of experiences that promote mental and spiritual well-being. Having received the gift of faith in Jesus, having received the love of God, let us obey God's call that we extend fellowship, well-being and all the rest of our inheritance as children of God to those who so deeply wish to have them.