

In the name of God who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

For the last few weeks, our Lectionary readings have been moving through the First Letter of John and parts of the Gospel of John. Scholars do not think the same person wrote these two works that appear in our New Testament; but scholars do think that this letter and the Gospel came from the same community that shared views about God's work in the world. This community was probably mostly Gentile, and not as familiar with the Hebrew bible and Jewish law. In this week's reading, we get a hint at what might have prompted the writing of the First Letter of John: people had become confused about exactly who Jesus was. And they thought if they got it wrong, they would lose the promise that God gave them. Fear of this kind of punishment meant that they had doubts about the love that God had shown them.

Earlier in this letter, the writer urges the reader to return to the core practices of disciples of Jesus: love of God and love of neighbor. The writer reminds us to practice self-reflection, to understand our own shortcomings, and to also rejoice in God's forgiveness when we repent of

those shortcomings. The writer reminds us that we are all beloved children of God; and the writer also reminds us that Jesus was God's son.

But what did that mean to readers sometime around the year 100, at least two generations past the earthly life of Jesus? What did messiah, anointed one, mean to the Gentiles reading this letter? Who was Jesus to them? Some of this community had begun to wonder if Jesus truly was human; after all, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is depicted as a spiritual person who knew all of God's plan, and went more or less serenely through the ordeal of the cross. There is no weeping at Gethsemane, no cry of abandonment before his death in the John's Gospel. So some in this community for whom this Gospel depiction of Jesus was central, began to teach that Jesus was only spirit with a visible form. Jesus was all divine, and not truly human. Where did that leave this community in relation to God?

We are all beloved children of God; if we love the parent, we love the child. This continues the theme of this letter, that we must love one another in action, not just in words. Love is a concrete behaviour, a way of being in the world that is visible, practical, and undeniably rooted in God. The commandment that we must love one another is a hard teaching; and this

kind of love certainly seems attainable only by someone who is divine, who is God, and not a fragile human like ourselves. But the writer reminds us that this Jesus comes to us, not only through repentance and the water of baptism; but physically, fully human, related to us by blood, exactly human like us in flesh.

Jesus is the fully human child of God, just as we are; Jesus is the fully divine Son of God, and somehow, we don't know how, in the end we will be transformed like him. Earlier in the letter the writer says, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."

All of this theology about the nature of Jesus was important to how people lived out their faith; but if they were too caught up in the arguments, the readers of this letter could be distracted from what it meant to be a disciple. So the writer tells them: You are commanded to love. Love means that if you have more than enough things and you see someone in need, you must share. Love means that if you profess to love God, you must show

the same love God has given you to those human beings around you. Love means not living with your own self-interest at the center of your world, but with the love of God and neighbor at the center of your world. Love is practical, boots-on-the-ground stuff; it is not an ethereal, above-us-all matter only for the divine. Love brings human and divine together in an inseparable bond.

All of that can seem heady and remote; but we have the antidote in today's reading from the Book of Acts. It involves Peter, which means it relates to us at our most human. Peter has just witnessed the Holy Spirit fill the Gentiles at Cornelius the Centurion's house; these Gentiles have the same experience Peter and the other apostles had at Pentecost. Peter is in the middle of this messy, unexpected event where human and divine come together; the Holy Spirit is alive, vital, and active in the midst of it; the water of baptism will bring these Gentiles into what is obviously no longer and exclusively Jewish community; they are equally beloved and called by God, the God who made of one blood all the peoples of the earth, the blood that was shared by Jesus, fully human and fully God.

Like the first readers of John's letter, the movement of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts may seem distant, something that happened only in the past. We may worry that we're getting our ideas about Jesus and about God wrong, and that somehow we'll lose out on God's promises if we don't get the rules and the formulas and the mechanics exactly right. But the Holy Spirit is no less powerful, no less capable, no less present than it was to Peter and those Gentiles in Cornelius' household. Believe that God's love for us is beyond our comprehension; let that love drive out fear, so that we can welcome the Truth as Cornelius did, and speak the Truth like Peter did. Jesus, our brother, lived a human life so that God could fully understand the difficulty of living out divine love in a broken world. We will be afraid sometimes; we will wonder if God is still with us sometimes; we will ask if God's promises will ever be fulfilled sometimes; but faith transcends fear and if we let the Holy Spirit move through us we can act with boldness, speaking the Truth, and loving each other as God loves us. God has the power and the will to do through us what we cannot do by ourselves. And this is Good News. Amen.