

Here I Stand

1 John

The Reverend Rita Wilbur

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“God said it; I believe it; that settles it.” Anybody ever heard that before? How about, “Other people may go with the fashion or trends of the time, but I have to follow the Bible.” Or if someone really wants to show off their Bible muscle, they could offer this quote from today’s passage: “If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater.... Those who do not believe in the testimony of God have made God a liar.” These quotes usually accompany Bible verses taken out of context to advocate creationism, or to oppose abortion or ordination of women or gay rights. They’re basically short-hand to say, “This is what I believe, and God agrees!”

Now, contrary to popular perception, we UCCers hold a range of views on these topics. We are not monolithic in our beliefs. But on the whole we tend to take stands that fundamentalists would say cannot possibly be Christian. So they throw the above quotes at us, accuse us of being fickle or trendy, anything but godly. And because we, alas, tend not to be as well-versed in our Bible, we don’t really know what to say in response. We seldom have Bible verses that we can pull out of context to justify our views, so we just cede that ground to the fundamentalists. Or we shy away from the Bible altogether because we’re afraid it says what those other people tell us it says.

If you’re like me when I was in college, it’s not like I pulled my beliefs out of the air. I believed what I did because it fit with my sense of God. I’d even read parts of the Bible on occasion, but I couldn’t pull out any Bible verses or say anything more constructive than a feeble, “Well, this is just what feels right to me.”

Needless to say, that is not an adequate defense. A first, or maybe second Peter in chapter something or other says (Okay, it’s 1 Peter 3:15; I had to look it up), “Always be prepared to give an account of the hope that is within you.” We need to have the courage of our convictions, to know that we also come to our stands on these issues through the Bible, that we are not just following modern trends. And I’m going to do that by looking at our passage in 1 John, as well as the context of the whole letter. I’m not going to spell out where I stand on certain issues. Rather, I’m going to give the Biblical basis by which I arrive at my stances. But keep in mind two things: first, that even my interpretation of 1 John is just one possible interpretation. Other people might see it differently. Second, that my interpretation of 1 John does not necessarily mean that everyone who agrees with it will therefore take the same stands on various social issues. But that doesn’t bother me. I don’t have a problem with someone having a different view on women’s ordination or abortion or homosexuality or whatever. There’s plenty of room in the Bible for various interpretations. What matters far more to me, the place where, like Martin Luther, here I stand and can do no other, is on my interpretation of 1 John. People can still disagree with that, but I will probably think less of them as a Christian because of it.

So, on to 1 John. We’ve been dipping into it occasionally over the past few weeks, and I’ve been thinking how I really ought to do a sermon on the letter as a whole because he’s making a coherent argument that we lose the thread of when we chop it up into bits. The context is that the writer is defending his community against those he sees as false prophets, especially people who broke away from the community and started challenging their beliefs. The Johannine church faced a lot of persecution, so they were under a lot of stress and self-doubt. In this letter, the author is addressing two questions: first, what do we know about God because of Jesus? In other words, what has Jesus revealed to us about God? And secondly, how do we know we are following the truth and not deceiving ourselves or being deceived by false prophets?

These are both really good questions that we in the UCC (and all Christians) ought to be asking ourselves, but especially we in the UCC because we're not always very good with our theology.

The first question John answers right off the bat in 1:5: "This is the message that we have heard from him (that is, Jesus) and proclaim to you: that God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all." Other than a few verses in the beginning, he largely drops this light/dark imagery, but it appears in other Johannine books, most notably the Gospel of John itself, where the prologue memorably says, "In him was life, and the life was the light of all peoples. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it." It is beautiful, evocative imagery, but what exactly does this light and darkness consist of?

As I said, he kind of drops this imagery and instead spends the bulk of his letter talking about love. If you've been paying attention these past few weeks to both the gospel and the epistle readings, you'll recognize that the word "love" has popped up an awful lot. In chapter two he connects these two images (2:10): "Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling." So living in the light, that is in God, is equated with love, and living in the darkness is equated with hate.

But here is another question: what is meant by a brother or sister? The Greek simply says "brother. Some interpreters see this as a kind of code word for fellow believer, the way some churches to this day will refer to members as Sister Jones and Brother Smith. So is this saying we only need to love fellow Christians and are free to hate non-Christians? Well, you could indeed interpret it that way, and the author may very well have meant it that way. But that is not how I can interpret it. Reading in the larger context of the Bible, everything from "love the stranger," which we hear 36 times in the Old Testament, to Jesus forgiving his executioners in the New, no. As I see it, God's commandment of love extends to all people, with no exceptions. Honestly, as if there could be exceptions to God's love! But as I said, interpretations may vary. Yet here I stand, I can do no other.

As I said, the letter goes on at great length about how if we are in God then we will love one another and so forth, but in 3:12 he gets a bit more specific: "We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother." Girardians will recognize the significance of this story! Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve. Abel's murder is the first crime in the Bible. John says Cain murdered Abel because his own deeds were evil and his brother's were righteous. Not that he's wrong, but it's a bit simplistic. More specifically you will recall that both brothers offered sacrifices to God, but God liked Abel's a bit better. This made Cain jealous, and so he killed his brother. In other words, the first crime was committed for religious reasons, in the name of God. Cain thought that his sacrifice, and by extension himself, was more worthy, so he killed his religious rival, an act he no doubt justified to himself because he loved God more than Abel did. But here's the thing: in a book as bloody as the Bible, God did not condone Abel's murder. God did not order Cain to kill his brother, and God does not accept the excuse that Cain did it out of love for God.

Heaven knows that there are many, many excuses we can find for killing and hating one another, but the absolute worst, the most pernicious – as John says, the excuse that comes straight from the devil himself – is the excuse that we are hating someone in the name of God. There is nothing more foul than that, for as John says, "God is light, and in God there is no darkness at all." No darkness. No hatred. No murder. None. I interpret this to mean that hatred is never, ever justified in God's name. Others may interpret it differently, but I think their reasoning is seriously faulty. At any rate, here I stand, I can do no other.

Now, most Christians are at least superficially aware of this, and so you'll get the whole "love the sinner hate the sin" shtick. And that view is not without merit. I believe it is possible to love the sinner and hate the sin, but I also believe we humans are masters of self-deception, and it is all too easy for us to blur the line there. As Jesus warned over and over again, we are always prone to hypocrisy. If you are going to love the sinner but hate the sin, then you had better love the heck out of that sinner! The first part needs to be your focus; let God take care of the second bit. Because the wages of sin here truly is death. Whatever little-s sin someone may commit, as John says, the greatest capital-S Sin is to hate your brother or sister, for in doing so you are like Cain and do not walk in the light of God, no matter how holy your reasoning may sound.

And we learn this lesson not only from Cain and Abel, but from Jesus himself. This is where we get into the passage in chapter five, about the testimony of the blood, which our lectionary skips over because ewww, icky! But John says the water, the blood, and the Spirit all testify in Jesus' behalf. The water is baptism, by which we are baptized into Jesus' life but also into his death. The blood is his death, his crucifixion. And you may recall my sermon from several weeks ago, that Jesus, like Abel, was murdered in the name of God and also country: both Judea and Rome. That's the testimony of blood, that an innocent man was murdered in the name of God and country, by people who did not love him and who cloaked their hatred in religious/patriotic terms, and in doing so committed the sin of Cain.

This is what it means, then, to believe in Jesus. It's not enough to say, "I believe in Jesus as my Lord and Savior." As Jesus himself says in Matthew 7:21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven." And that will, as we ought to know good and well by now, is to love one another.

Love is the key. Love is central. Love is what it's all about. So whatever issue of the day we're talking about, whether abortion, women's ordination, stem cell research, the environment, gay rights, whatever – love must be the beginning, the middle, and the end. We will take a variety of stands on these issues, and that's okay, because believe it or not these issues are not about sin. They are about the variety of ways in which Christians respond to the pressing issues of the day, and it is entirely possible for good points to be made on multiple sides.

So do not believe it when people say, "Well, I just believe what the Bible says" – because you do, too! Above all, do not believe it when people try to use the Bible to justify their hatred or persecution or murder of others, whether spiritual or physical. Because that is indeed the testimony of humans. We always say we're doing it in God's name. Rather, believe what God has said in God's own behalf, that in God there is no darkness at all, and that God's commandment is to love. As John says in 3:9, "Those who have been born of God (that is, who live in love and the light), do not sin because God's seed (of love) abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God."

Here I stand, I can do no other. Or as the bumper sticker says, "God said it; I believe it; that settles it."