



Letter From a Friend

~ 2 John 1-13

Sometimes we cannot be near our friends; so, our friendship and support for one other must be maintained over great distances. Fortunately for us, we not only have the U.S. mail, but we have the telephone system by which to maintain long distance friendships –and we have E-mail. Recently, one of our friends in Washington State reminded us of this as we traded long letters and phone visits to support her in what has been, for her, a powerful life crisis. In a letter to Gloria and me, she writes

"You've proved again that distance makes no difference between friends."

That, exactly, is the meaning and substance of the letter before us --two friends who wish they could be together, but are making the best of circumstances with the next best alternative. John writes his feelings in the last line of the letter, "Having many things to write unto you, I would not write with paper and ink: but I trust to come unto you, and speak face to face, that our joy may be full" (2 John 13). All true friends love to be in the presence of one another; such occasions are among the greatest, fullest joys of life.

The John who writes, does not sign his name; yet, he is easily known to the "elect lady" by reason of long familiarity --much like an old friend who does not really need to identify him or herself in a phone call. Identity is obvious in such cases. We are identified by our characteristics. John simply calls himself "the elder" --he is possibly the oldest living Apostle as he writes. He was also old in God's service and experience. He'd tasted much of heaven, and he was a lot nearer to going there. These were two old friends.

The little letter is the shortest in the New Testament. There are similarities between the first and second letters of John, in that, they both deal in a large way with the love of God. However, there are also differences. The first letter is a general letter, addressed to Christians at large, while the second letter is written to a specific individual and, thereby, demonstrates how the love of God might operate in a real and actual friendship.

Tradition tells us, and Scripture suggests that this lady was a noble Christian matron (chosen of God and choice), with a wonderful family of children. It is well that the gospel has gotten among such folk; yet, it is even more likely that the gospel has created such folk. To me, it is lovely and beautiful to see such people demonstrate their calling of God by their kind and caring hearts.

This letter is, however, written to a family. While individuals may make a great difference for Christ, families may accomplish things that no individual could ever undertake. Some of you, who have a family farm background know what I mean. There is a very real sense in which the Church may think of itself as

a family. It is an entire family that is written to and encouraged in this letter. Perhaps it is a strength of this church that we mostly do things as a family --men, women, boys, and girls; mom, dad, sister, and brother. All working together (we tend not to divide up into men/women, old/young), all have a common goal, all support one another, all make a contribution, all are included --none are excluded. God's church does include and need all. A true team is never built by division. Families are made, not by separating the members, but by working together as a group. As I have noted, every true farm family knows that.

Every good Christian friendship is based upon truth. "For the truth's sake, which dwells in us, and shall be with us forever" (2 John 2). There is a wonderful genuineness and openness that is brought into this friendship by their mutual dedication and adherence to "the truth" --especially as it is represented in Christ, "the way the truth and the life." It is a friendship based in truth. "Whom I love in the truth" (2 John 1). In fact, John was not the only one who loved this lady "in the truth," "all they that knew the truth" did also.

Truth is the basis for every good friendship. Truth and genuineness go together. Openness and truth go together. If you're going to be my friend, it is better that you know who I am --another struggling human being. It is better that we understand our mutual struggles and even our failures. Christ and truth go together. This genuineness, this penchant toward the truth, this willingness to be honest about themselves, John wrote, "shall be with us forever." It is not a matter of "fits and starts," or "moons and moods." It is a permanent part of our Christian character which makes us material for good friendships. It cannot be stopped.

The remainder of the greeting is almost a celebration of this old friendship. "Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love" (2 John 1:3). Blessings on this Christian family! John wishes for them: divine favor and good will, pardon and forgiveness, and as a cherry on top --tranquility of spirit. These, come from the triune God. John wishes them all upon his good friend.

Do not fail to notice that love and truth are again linked in this verse. You cannot have truth without love and you cannot have love without truth. Otherwise, you have a friend you cannot trust. No deep friendship can be made without both of these graces. Love and truth.

Now we go back to the family. "I rejoice greatly that I found of your children walking in truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father. And now I beseech you lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto you, but that which we had from the beginning (that is, from the beginning of Christianity), that we love one another" (2 John 4,5). Once again, truth and love are linked --walking in truth, loving one another.

When the love of God is passed on from generation to generation in the family --from parent to child, it becomes a joy to old ministers like John. It is wonderful to see a hopeful, new, rising generation to carry on in truth and love. Such parents are to be congratulated, and Paul entreats her to carry on. Keep on with more of the same. Change is not always what we need.

Paul wrote, "But, as touching brotherly love, you need not that I write unto you; for you yourselves are

taught of God to love one another. But we beseech you, brethren that you increase more and more" (1 Thessalonians 4:9,10). In other words, carry on with what you are already doing. Carry on!

True love takes pains and behaves, "And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning --you must walk in it" (2 John 6). Love must not only be felt, it must be demonstrated. You cannot love and be selfish. Love gives of itself to another. Is it more important that I watch the rest of a TV program or visit with a distressed friend on the telephone for an hour? Love is not entirely free and without cost --it needs to be demonstrated. Should I take a nap or write this letter? Should I pay my loan off at the bank a little faster or should I help with a disaster? Should I take the afternoon off or make dinner for the neighbor who just got home from the hospital? You can write (illustrate) the rest of this sermon. I'm sure you've got some ideas here.

All true friendship (love and truth) is grounded in Christ. In verses 4-11, John tells his friend about certain preachers who were teaching that Jesus Christ did not really come in the flesh (2 John 7). That is, they were teaching that he was not Immanuel, or "God with us." If we do not believe Christ is God, then we lose the "doctrine of Christ" (2 John 9). The doctrine of Christ is the doctrine of love as the solution. It includes the doctrine of forgiveness, the doctrine of healing, the doctrine of understanding, the doctrine of openness and truthfulness, the doctrine of servitude, and the doctrine of humility. **These are the special doctrines of Christ.**

Jesus warned the lady to beware of, and to withhold support, and even good will (blessing and confirmation) from all such teachers (2 John 1:10, 11). When Christ is taken out of the message, truth is compromised --truth is lost. A Bible where Christ is no longer the central message, theme, and purpose, is no Bible at all. After all, Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). When truth is lost, so is love. *Love and truth* are intimate companions. They are, in fact, the basis for this particular friendship.

Good and old Christian friends are bound to live through times of dark and sad news and turns of events in the cycles and challenges of life and ministry. This was one of them. It is not that we want to depress one another, but to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Now, the substance of the Christian faith is that God has come in the flesh in Jesus Christ.

Whenever we retreat from that doctrine we are in danger of (verse 8) "losing what we have worked for." In another place John said, "Hold fast that which you have, that no man take your crown" (Revelation 3:11). We lose ground in Christian ministry not only when we cease to believe that Immanuel ("God with us") is the hope of humanity, but when we fail to promote it and teach it as the essential solution. **There are always too many issues ready to take over the attention, efforts, and resources of the church.** They may be good, but they are not Christ.

The letter ends with the wish of all good friends who are separated by miles, "Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete" (2 John 12). I wish I could be there.

Love and truth; thus, friendship is the offspring of all true virtue. It was not for nothing that Jesus said, "I have called you friends."

I think, perhaps, this wonderful lady had a sister in John's congregation; for he closes with, "The children of your elect sister send their greetings" (2 John 13). So, this Christian family is even larger; she has a sister, and her children have cousins. They served in John's congregation. How wonderful! I think one of the many special gifts God has given me in life are my own sister Edith, who served as secretary of the First Baptist Church at New Britain, Pennsylvania for many, many years. We share in the work of Christ. We learned computer skills from each other. We encouraged each other; we traded church bulletins. I have a cousin who I grew up with and who has never ceased serving Christ. Now, his children carry on with the same love for Christ, as do our own. His daughter is a missionary in Africa. His brother was a missionary –and now a hospital chaplain. He has another brother who served as a minister –now, also a chaplain. And, they all married wonderful people!

This little letter is about two things: *family and friends*; they are the very fabric and underpinning for God's good work in the world. At their very best, they are the product of the *love and truth* that come from our Lord Jesus Christ. A letter from a friend. Can anything be more the work of Christ?

Sometimes, the substantial is not the spectacular & very often the spectacular is not substantial.
A letter. Simply, a letter from a friend.