

Shorter New Testament Letters
1st, 2nd, and 3rd John: *Real Love Casts Out Fear*

“Struggling through disagreement”
(3rd John)

Dan Collison
March 3, 2019

POETRY READING

The Blood of Theology
By Mark Nepo¹

He was insistent on framing
everything to his own way of thinking,
taking every effect and clipping it back
to the shape of his mind which like
a cookie cutter kept stamping
the things he saw,
the people he met,
the stories he heard.

For some reason,
I tried to make him understand.
I said, “The disease almost
took me from the earth.
The rabid vehicle
almost crushed their daughter.
The alcohol in my brother’s veins
almost made him bloodless.”

He kept stamping around
with his cookie-cutter mind,
“Are you saying there is a God or not?”

I sat with him and tried again:
“Sometimes, the weight of things brings us to our knees, brings us
to a common pool in which
we’re forced to see the underside
of what we show no one,

and in that moment, God
breaks our dearest principle
and we are left with the truth
of each other...”

¹ Nepo, Mark. Published in *The Way Under the Way: The Place of True Meeting*. Sounds True, Boulder, CO. © 2016. Pages 116-117

He stopped to ponder this, and I, unsure how such things build in anyone, I felt the shadow of a great bird enter him and then through me, untying something in us both.

Introduction

1. Today's teaching concludes a teaching series that began on October 1, 2017 exploring the shorter letters of the New Testament seeking to glean wisdom from the struggle, confusion, and debates of these letters such that we become clearer minded and generous Christ followers amidst our modern struggles, confusion and debates. Next Sunday we begin a new teaching series on the Parables of Jesus, which comprises approximately a third of everything that Jesus taught as written down in the four gospel biographies of Jesus-- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The word "gospel" means good news and couldn't we all use a little more good news these days?!
2. We considered calling the entire shorter letter series "Reading other People's Mail" because these shorter letters are exactly that, written correspondence to specific people and churches in the first century and across the Roman Empire. But, that title seemed a bit creepy. And, yet of all of the shorter letters we have covered to date, 3rd John, today's text, feels the most like we are truly reading someone's personal mail in that many consider 3rd John the most nontheological letter in the entire New Testament. It is a personal letter between John and a man named Gaius who was likely a personal ally to John amidst a significant set of disagreements that John encountered with one of the churches he started in Ephesus, that likely went through a split and with a lay leader named Diotrephes creating major problems for John.

Let's read John's personal mail!

3rd John:

To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.

² Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. ³ It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it. ⁴ I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

⁵ Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. ⁶ They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God. ⁷ It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. ⁸ We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.

⁹ I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us.¹⁰ So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

¹¹ Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.¹² Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.

¹³ I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. ¹⁴ I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.

3 John. NIV

3rd John is a highly personal letter. And, because John mentions names that we know nothing about and a disagreement that, at least on the surface, represents nothing more than personal rancor and difference of opinion—there is little to discuss here with the exception of John's sheer determination to re-connect to a house church that he likely founded. And, the way he attempted to use his relational connections to find a way to break through the standoff.

A. Disagreements in the First Century Church

1. In the First Century there were no church denominational boards or Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox or Coptic Church religious structures to sort out disputes. So, disagreements were settled locally and amongst locally designated leaders. Early Church life was connected across churches though, because it was the practice of the Early Christians to bestow special authority upon the original apostles who were eye witness of Jesus, and then by succession other Christian leaders as time moved forward amongst various organically organized churches scattered across various Roman cities and provinces.

The one exception to this informal way of addressing disagreements was a formally gathered ethics council recorded in the New Testament book of Acts Chapter 15. The ethics council was convened because most of the Early Churches were splintering over the issue of whether or not non-Jewish (or Gentile) Christ followers needed to follow Jewish traditions, customs and religious laws. Referred to as “The Council of Jerusalem” most of the notable leaders of the Early Church gathered in Jerusalem around AD 50 to try and settle this complex matter. The net result of that gathering was the adoption of a more inclusive posture in general and the easing of mandates on traditional Jewish religious practices in specific.²

2. The Apostle John's disagreement with Diotrephes seemed more personal than theological or cultural. And, John must have felt that his only hope for re-connecting with the church mentioned in his 3rd letter was through his trusted allies connected to the church in question, principally Gaius and secondarily Demetrius. One scholar notes that Gaius may

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Jerusalem (accessed 2-28-19)

or may not have been a part of the same house church as Diotrephes who had been spreading malicious nonsense about John and his colleagues. But, Gaius would have for sure known Diotrephes.

I wonder what Diotrephes was saying about John? “Oh, that John, he wasn’t Jesus’ favorite.” That John, just because he knew Jesus thinks he *knows* Jesus.” That John!”

Whatever Diotrephes was saying, John’s reputation was being smeared. And, John’s strategy, for better or for worse...

(...remember, just because it is written about in the Bible doesn’t mean it’s the best way to do things! Read the ancient Hebrew texts about Jacob’s lousy parenting skills, King David’s egregious mis-use of power, and in the New Testament about even the apostle John and his brother James’ temperaments to know what I am talking about. John and James were nick named “Sons of Thunder”, and that was not a compliment!)

...John’s strategy—for better or for worse was to work the edges of the conflict with those he trusted so that when the right moment presented itself, John would have a credible gathering of other local leaders to confront Diotrephes with the goal of attaining a breakthrough in Diotrephes’ dysfunctional and exclusionary practices.³

3. No one knows if John’s plan worked or not. And, ultimately readers of this personal letter are left with a simple take away that is this: John had tremendous resolve and was willing to take the necessary risks to struggle through what he deemed an important disagreement until a breakthrough could be achieved. Resolve and risk in the face of uncertain outcomes was key to his approach.
4. This is true for disagreements of all kinds and is highly relevant to the many moments of bitter but important disagreements that swirl in church and society. Most important disagreements are very complex and can only be resolved over years and sometimes decades. Sometimes centuries! So, it is important to pay attention to what may seem like small breakthroughs.

For instance, I recently read about a fierce disagreement regarding the National Rifle Association (or NRA) between Delta Airlines and politicians in the state of Georgia. In the wake of the 2018 shooting massacre of 17 students and teachers at a High School in Parkland Florida when student leaders mass organized rallies calling for more strict gun control laws the Chief Executive of the NRA was quoted as saying, “The Mainstream Media loves mass shootings and use them to juice their ratings and push their agenda...crying white mothers are ratings gold.”⁴

Parkland student activists did research on all organizations that support the NRA explicitly or implicitly and reached out to the CEO of Delta Airlines about their NRA member discounts. The CEO wasn’t even aware they offered the discount, but because he found the NRA’s rhetoric after the shooting to be divisive, he deemed it not appropriate for Delta

³ Burge, Gary, The NIC Application Commentary, Letters of John. Zondervan. 1996. Pages 244-245.

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2018/02/22/after-silence-on-parkland-nra-pushes-back-against-law-enforcement-the-media-and-gun-control-advocates/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8c2f7aeaec11 (accessed 2-28-19)

to be supporting the NRA through member discounts. So, without even consulting the Delta Board of Directors, he unilaterally cancelled the NRA membership discount reasoning that “if you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice.”⁵

In retaliation, Georgia politicians (where Delta’s world headquarters is located) rescinded an estimated \$40 million in state tax exemptions that Delta was counting on. In response, the CEO said “while the decision wasn’t easy, it was a quick one. You know, \$40 million—our brand is worth so much more.” In the end, standing up to the NRA was a net positive because Georgia politicians quietly returned the tax exemptions to avoid Delta from being courted away to other states.

B. Disagreements in the Church Today

1. If only things could progress for the Christian Church writ large as it struggles to be a Church for all people groups and not just some people groups. American Society sets aside February as Black History Month and March as Women’s History Month because of the historic struggles for equality across racial and gender identities. Sadly, across all of American society it has been the Christian church by large majority who has historically been one of the most entrenched institutions fighting *against* equal rights for people across race and gender.

It is true that no large institutions are a monolith including Christian religion where courageous Christ followers were among the first abolitionists against slavery, suffragettes and their allies for women’s voting rights, leaders of color and their allies in the civil rights movement, and now courageously in the fray for the people group who identify as LGBTQ.

It is a Christian and basic universal truth that everyone is created with sacred identity and to bring intentional harm to another creation of God, is to offend God. This, by the way, is at the crux of the sexual identity debate. On one side people consider anything other than heterosexuality as an affront to God based upon seven passages of Scripture and religious tradition. On the other side, and particularly those who are family and friends with LGBTQ individuals, LGBTQ is simply an identity variation as with many other variations that occur in creation, and because they are a persecuted small percentage of people it honors our Christian ethics of compassion, mercy, and justice to protect their well-being and advocate for equality.

2. The United Methodist Church (or UMC) is the most recent example of how difficult it can be to struggle through complex people group identity disagreements. The UMC is the second largest Protestant denomination in the United States. They had a famous historic split over slavery in 1844 but came back together in 1939.⁶ They now appear to be on the verge of another historic split after a divisive vote last week on whether or not to offer freedom to individual churches to discern equality for LGBTQ members of their communities. Though a majority of American bishops and members supported what they called a “One Church Plan”⁷ to remain together and offer one another freedom to discern approaches to ordination and local ministry... there was an International Delegate vote of 438-384 to

⁵ <https://www.inc.com/bill-murphy-jr/the-ceo-of-delta-air-lines-just-made-a-truly-stunning-confession-and-he-did-it-on-linkedin.html> (accessed 2-28-19)

⁶ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Methodist_Church (accessed 2-28-19)

⁷ <https://onechurchplan.org/> (Accessed 2-28-19)

maintain their current positions and exclusions.⁸ And, what happens next is anyone's guess because of so many United Methodist pastors and churches already include LGBTQ members and clergy as equals.

3. Our congregation is part of a much smaller denomination but is experiencing just as real a struggle within the Covenant denomination. In 2018 this community released a ministry direction statement that is both Covenant *and disagrees* with one policy topic developed by the Covenant Denomination in the 1990's and then layered into further documents over time as to how ordained pastors and churches are to ethically abide by this policy statement. The key policy statement is regarding human sexuality and says:

“Faithfulness in heterosexual marriage, celibacy in singleness—these constitute the Christian standard. When we fall short, we are invited to repent, receive the forgiveness of God, and amend our lives.”

Over time more and more layers of policy was developed that says that Covenant pastors are not permitted to officiate or pray at same-sex unions and that, “Congregations should have a facilities use policy in keeping with ECC guidelines and they respectfully expect that the policy include, church facilities not be used for same-sex-ceremonies, unions, blessings, and all related events.”

4. For those who are visiting today, or new to First Covenant—The Evangelical Covenant Denomination (the “ECC”) is an association of about 850 independent and congregationally organized churches who seek to be collegial and connected.⁹ This larger association is divided into 11 regions called “conferences.” Our local church is part of the Northwest Conference that includes about 140 churches in Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and half of Wisconsin.¹⁰ In contrast to the organizational structure of many Protestant denominations to their local churches, in the Covenant all local churches own their own property, call their own pastors, and follow their own unique constitutions and bylaws—elect leaders and have final say on all local congregational matters.
5. *This* historic Covenant community was birthed in 1874, eleven years before the larger denomination was organized and we opened the Swedish Tabernacle part of our three-part building in 1887. After decades of decline that begin in the 1950's our community went through a comprehensive revitalization process in 2009 when I was called to be the pastor. Over several years of studying of Scripture, the Covenant tradition and larger Christian traditions, discerning the leading of the Holy Spirit, and learning from the stories and witness of our LGBTQ members and staff—we as a local Covenant church have discerned that the larger sacred human rights conversations about sexual orientation and identity and the Christian movement need to be thoughtfully engaged with a posture more inclusive than the currently adopted position of the Covenant—as is the dissenting right of each church including many churches who continue to dissent against the Covenant's adopted positions on baptism and women in ministry. Thus, there are several other Covenant pastors and churches in similar places as us and some who have also drafted and released statements on LGBTQ inclusion.

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-religion-lgbt-united-methodist/united-methodist-church-strengthens-ban-on-same-sex-marriage-lgbt-clergy-idUSKCN1QG022> (accessed 2-28-19)

⁹ <https://covchurch.org/> (accessed 6-3-18)

¹⁰ <https://www.northwestconference.org/> (accessed 6-3-18)

Our church' adopted ministry direction statement can be downloaded from our website and is neither long, nor a very complicated document.¹¹ After describing our theological moorings and commitments the document simply says that everyone is treated equally in our community and with the same levels of pastoral care whether cis-gendered, transgendered, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, or heterosexual. The same Christian standards are for *everyone* and on the basis of equal standing before one another and before the Creator of all things.

6. Because of this inclusive posture, our new ministry statement, and several years of disagreement—on May 17, 2018 the elected leaders of the Covenant denomination suspended my ministry license and the local Executive Board of the Northwest Conference initiated an “out of harmony” process with the signatures of 27 pastors (none having contacted us for conversation) calling for action against us as a church. The Leadership Team of First Covenant immediately granted me a local ministry license and sought, with no success, to have conversations with those 27 pastors.

The whole process has elevated to the national level leading to a delegation of seven First Covenant Church leaders travelling to Chicago this coming Saturday, March 9 to meet with the full ECC Executive Board to re-iterate what our church leadership communicated last June in writing and I share here in part here:

“We respectfully disagree with (Pastor Collison’s) letter of suspension in the strongest terms. We believe our position, as described in our statement (“How we live together well and what it means to ‘love all’”) reflects the love of the One who first loved us. We hold it humbly, but comfortably, and believe it fits the Covenant’s long history of unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and charity in all things.

Additionally, we are grieved that the Board of Ordered Ministry has chosen to pursue this punitive action. We believe this to be an unprecedented move in the history of the Evangelical Covenant Church. We continue to be an Evangelical Covenant congregation, and we will continue to have Pastor Dan Collison serve as our Lead Pastor. We have locally licensed him, and will fully support him as he continues to minister with and to our community.”

And, in response to the initiating of an “out of harmony” process, Carina Aleckson, chair of the Leadership Team, wrote (in part):

“The preface to the 1973 Covenant Hymnal acknowledges that the committee “reaffirmed the principle of freedom by refusing to move in the direction of liturgical uniformity.” Instead, it offers various materials to help local congregations cultivate patterns of worship that edify the whole body. They outline their balance of historic and contemporary influences, how music was re-harmonized for sing-a-bility, and the intention to offer repeated tunes in multiple keys. Descants were added as ways to embellish familiar songs.

¹¹ <http://www.1stcov.org/ministry-guidance> (accessed 6-3-18)

There are many types of harmony, and within the largeness of the Covenant, First Covenant's "Love All" statement is, perhaps, a descant—something that embellishes. While it is very important for our ministry at First Covenant Minneapolis, it was never envisioned as a document for other churches or congregations to endorse or adopt. It is the result of many congregational conversations that took place over nearly a year—or longer, if prior conversations are also included.

Not all of us at First Covenant have long personal or familial ties to the Covenant, though some do. All of us do believe in the best of what the Covenant has historically offered: unity in essential matters of faith, freedom in non-salvific matters (things that are in the Bible, but not related to one's salvation), and charity in all things. We did not go looking for this fight; in the course of seeking to do our best ministry in our local church, we felt that being clear in our intentions was critical. We have repeatedly requested—in alignment with Covenant historic ways of navigating sensitive, non-salvific matters—to be allowed to abide.”

7. I shared this level of detail last June and share it here again here today because, like the Apostle John's letters, our personal letters to the ECC speak to our unfolding Covenant congregational story and an important and major disagreement. And, as our disagreements play out in the days ahead, we have reason for hope. We have reason for hope because the work of the Church has survived conflict and disagreements as complex as this in the First Century and for more than 2,000 years and will continue to do so in our time. We may need to learn anew how to love those for whom we disagree and there will be twists and turns. But, if we continue to seek to reflect the love of Christ to all, and in all that we do, even and in our disagreements, always leaning into courage and kindness, grace and mercy, service and care for marginalized—no conflict—from the Apostle John to us today, is able to stop the flow of the love of Christ from us to one another and to our broader community that we are entrusted to faithfully serve and love.

Conclusion

In the spirit of the way the Apostle John ended his final letter expressing love and concern to those who seek peace, and because of the critical nature of our moment, I invite First Covenant Leadership Team members and the others who are a part of the delegation to Chicago this coming Saturday to come forward for a brief prayer together. Not everyone who is going is here today, but we are privileged to have such a remarkable group representing our community including long time church members, historic Covenant leaders, and newer elected Leadership Team members as well.

Thank you, dear friends and leaders, for your clarity, courage, and commitment to kindness, mercy and justice.

Please pray with me.

God of everything in our galaxy and on our earth, including all of the people groups of our world—we acknowledge the complexity of our different identities and frailty of our religious traditions. We confess our failures and admit our weaknesses even as we embrace being a fully beloved community seeking to faithfully follow Jesus Christ in our time and place.

In this moment of travail, we ask that, like the poem read earlier, the truth of each other's sheer presence in a shared room, and the shadow of what the poet may have referenced as the Spirit of God unties something on both sides of our disagreement. We pray that *your* presence is larger than our disagreement in the meeting this coming Saturday afternoon and all deliberations going forward. We pray that our disagreement can shift away from being framed as the accuser and the accused to dialogue as sisters and brothers in Christ and in generous Covenant with one another.

We pray for a breakthrough and a creative way forward. In the name, and for the sake of Christ and Christ's love for all people. Amen.

Communion

1. The Christian practice of Holy Communion is a sacrament or sacred action that Christ gave us as a tangible and even tactile way to remember that God was not only manifested to remind us of God's love for us, but also that God continues to be with us, and for us, in every moment, and every season, and for the entirety of our lives.

Christian communion is available for everyone here today. If Christian faith and community is new--I want you to know that at First Covenant we are a grace-filled gathering of people who see ourselves as a family of equals, everyone humbly in need of grace. And, we are committed to a journey of generous and openhanded faith in which everyone is given freedom and safe space to journey toward Jesus Christ. So, some choose to not participate in communion, and we welcome such authenticity.

The act of becoming a Christ-follower is the convergence of God moving upon our hearts and minds to become a Christ-follower...and us making the decision to believe that Jesus is the Incarnation of God, that he died, rose again, and is here right now through being One with God the Creator and Spirit infused into all living things. The result of such convergence is the greatest mystery of all—spiritual awakening to the presence of Christ dwelling in our souls through the presence of God's Holy Spirit leading and guiding us for the rest of our lives. And, a deep sense that we are completely loved and free to become our best selves.

2. New to Christ or renewed in Christ we are *all* invited to the table of God where Christ invites all of us to eat and to drink.
 - At the point you are ready to receive communion I invite you to move into the two main isles and then return to your seats on the outer isles.
 - We have wooden bowls for the purpose of our monthly benevolence offering that goes to members of our community in financial need.
 - Our form of communion is called "intinction" where you take a piece of gluten free bread and dip it into the juice.
 - There will be people here to pray with you if you have specific requests to be prayed for.
3. Hear now, the invitation of Jesus to this banquet table of mercy. Jesus said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, he said, "This cup represents the new covenant of grace; whenever you drink it, do it in remembrance of me."

Please pray with me.

4. God we are here today because you chose to incarnate love and pursue us with your boundless grace. We revel in your embrace. Meet us here. Speak to us now. As we eat and drink these elements, fill us with your presence and renew our souls. In Jesus name, amen.

Benediction

As our new week begins may we remember to have clear minded resolve and take the necessary risks to remain in any struggle representing an important disagreement until a breakthrough can be achieved.

Go in Peace. Amen.