

“Discerning Love”
Sermon Series on the Book of 1 John
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
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(1 Jn. 2:18-28; 4:1-6)

Introduction.

One of the earliest lessons we teach our children is how to tell time, and this is because we live in such a time-conscious culture. Whereas people in other parts of the world worry a lot less about dates and deadlines, we’re rather obsessed with them, aren’t we? Of course, this hasn’t been the case as much during the global pandemic we’ve been experiencing the past couple of weeks. It feels like everything has slowed down. As one friend put it, “It feels like a perpetual snow day!”

In spite of the strangeness of this season we’re currently in, when life is normal most of us tend to be focused on time a great deal. Last week when we did a live stream of our worship service for the first time, just before we were supposed to go live at 11 am, the Wi-Fi at the church crashed. Our tech guru, Bob Gassett, scrambled and got it working again, and we were able to begin just a couple of minutes late. But I’m sure many of you were thinking, “Hey, it’s 11 o’clock. Why hasn’t the worship service started?” We’re pretty conscious of time, aren’t we?

The apostle John was also concerned that the followers of Christ know how to tell time. However, it wasn’t *chronological* time-telling that concerned him. Instead, he wanted to make sure his readers could tell the time *spiritually*. He was focused on how God measures time in contrast to how we measure it. The way God reckons time is an important theological matter that every follower of Christ should be concerned about, because the Bible says, “Time is actually running out.” As John puts it in his letter, “We are in the last hour.”

Now, before you think I’m going to use the Covid-19 pandemic to predict the end of the world, let me stop you before you go there. I’m not. I believe we’re going to get through this, and I also believe that God is going to help us make this one of our finest hours as a church in the way we show up and shine as lights in the darkness of this world. What I am saying is that every generation has had to deal with the forces of evil and the problem of false teachers who are enemies of Jesus – antichrists as John calls them, and we should never be surprised whenever we have to deal with them today.

The word “antichrist” has a way of striking curiosity and even perhaps fear in our hearts. However, given all the strange and wild speculations that surface

whenever the word is mentioned in Scripture, it's essential that we have a biblically balanced understanding of who the antichrists were, and are, and what they actually do. In the Bible antichrists are the enemies of Jesus, and Scripture tells us that spiritual conflict is inevitable whenever we choose to walk with God.

There are two matters I want to talk about this morning that have to do with discerning love. I want you to consider how we need to discern the time and we need to discern the spirits in order to live a life of discerning love.

I. Discerning the Time.

In his letter John writes, *"Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour"* (1 Jn. 2:18). What exactly is John talking about here? He's referring to the prediction of the prophets in the Bible regarding the coming judgment of the Lord at the end of time, but the curious thing about these predictions is that it is a very large window during which they will be fulfilled. For example, the apostle Peter quoted the prophet Joel when he said, *"In the last days I will pour out my Spirit on all people"* (Acts 2:17). Then the apostle equated the remarkable experience of the tongues of fire coming on the disciples on the day of Pentecost as the beginning of the last days predicted by the prophet.

It is clear from his sermon that Peter interpreted Scripture to say that the beginning of the last days started on the day of Pentecost, and yet you and I are living in the last days too. Jesus hasn't returned to the earth and completed the work of His kingdom, and we're living in between the two comings of Christ. So there is a very large window of fulfillment to this prophecy. Jesus Christ may return any day now, but He may yet tarry another thousand years. No one really knows for sure. And every generation has thought theirs might be the last.

No matter how you look at prophecy concerning the end times, you and I are closer to the return of Christ than we were this time yesterday. And we are closer than we have ever been before. And as the time of Christ's return nears we shouldn't be surprised when the forces of evil rear their ugly heads and seek to render harm to our Lord, His mission, and to His church, the people of God. These are the antichrists John mentions. So each of us needs to discern the time we live in and realize that we're in a season of spiritual warfare, and it will require each of us to be vigilant in following Christ.

In 1 Chronicles 12 we read of the various groups of people who were considered David's mighty men. Buried in the list – this "Hall of Fame" of ancient warriors – is one clan known as "the men of Issachar." There were 200 chiefs in this extended family, and a remarkable statement is made about them. The Bible says that the men of Issachar ". . . understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (1 Chronicles 12:32). What a great and lasting tribute. The church of

Jesus Christ needs to be like the men of Issachar. We need to discern the times in order to know what the Lord wants us to do.

People have asked me, “Peter, what do you think the Lord is trying to teach us during this pandemic?” In other words, “How do you discern this time, and what do you think the Lord is up to in this?” Personally, I think the Lord is trying to tell us several things through this global crisis.

I think He’s trying to get us to set aside our differences and learn how to work together again. It’s encouraging to see the folks in Washington coming together and trying to solve the problems of this global threat. I also think God is trying to get us all to slow down. We’ve been stopped in our tracks, encouraged to shelter in place, and to cease from our frenetic activity. All of a sudden we’ve realized that all those things we thought were so important to be doing really aren’t that necessary. Now, of course, eventually we need to get back to some regular rhythms when life returns to normal (whatever normal ends up being!), but I hope when that happens we don’t forget the principle of Sabbath the Lord is trying to remind us of during this global crisis.

My friend Sara Singleton wrote this in her church newsletter last week: “In the initial days of temporary workplace closures many people experienced the surprise blessing of not having to cram all of their here-to-fore responsibilities into the same jam-packed hours they endured as their daily routine. Ceasing to commute, stopping the after-school practices, cancelling travel and parties and community engagements provided a big sigh of relief for many. That’s when the human-as-machine model showed its falsehood. We were made for more, and it took a pandemic to experience this.” I think Sara’s right.

Another thing I think the Lord is trying to teach us is to put our trust in Him alone. Most of us look to our own ability to protect ourselves, and our children, more than we do in placing our trust in Christ. And we’ve come to see just how fragile our lives really are and how dependent we are on God for everything when you come right down to it. Some of us have lost wages, and we worry if we’re going to lose our jobs. Others of us are living in fear to such an extent we’re almost in a panic.

But in Psalm 91 the psalmist writes:

*“Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.*

*I will say of the LORD, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust.’*

*Surely he will save you
from the fowler’s snare
and from the deadly pestilence.*

*He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.
You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.”*

It's as though God put this psalm in the Bible for you and me today. Are you burdened by worry? Are you afraid about what might happen with this virus? Do the days ahead seem dark and full of difficulty to you? Don't give into fear, and remember that the grace and guidance of the Lord are given to us like manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16:4), one day at a time! Discern the time, look to God, and put your trust in Him to provide all you need. He will help you cope with the challenges we're all facing.

II. Discerning the Spirits.

“Dear children, this is the last hour, and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come....Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn. 2:18; 4:1).

While it appears that the apostle John coined the word “antichrist,” he didn't make up the idea. Daniel in the OT calls this rival of Christ “the coming prince” (Dan. 9:27), and the apostle Paul calls him “the man of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2:3). John will portray him as the beast from the sea in Revelation 13. But in this text the apostle is warning his readers about false teachers, and in particular *the* antichrist who will one day come. John says several things about the antichrists. He says they have a limited period of time to do their work, they don't speak the truth, they are people of deception, and they abandon God's people, which is the church. And remember, as John says in his letter, *“He that is in us is stronger than he that is in the world” (1 Jn. 4:4).*

John says we need to test the spirits. In other words, we need to test who we listen to in order to determine if they are speaking the truth. There are a lot of voices in our world today, and it's difficult to know who is speaking the truth sometimes. The phrase “fake news” has crept into our vocabulary which indicates just how diverse and contradictory the voices can be. So we need to test the spirits in order to determine what is actually true.

Even in this pandemic there are conflicting reports about how we can best flatten the curve and even if it's possible to avoid a catastrophe. But beyond the pandemic, I have an even greater concern about which voices you and I listen to

regarding the truth about God, the meaning of life, and how we're supposed to live in the world today.

In his landmark book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, British missionary and author Leslie Newbigin wrote, "The gospel is news of what has happened. The problem of communicating it in a pluralist society is that it simply disappears into the undifferentiated ocean of information. It represents one opinion among millions of others. It cannot be 'the truth,' since in a pluralist society truth is not one but many. It may be 'true for you,' but it cannot be true for everyone. To claim that it is true for everyone is simply arrogance. It is permitted as one opinion among many."¹

But Christians believe that the truth about Jesus Christ is *the* foundational truth on which all other truths hang, and we also believe that the truth of God as revealed in Scripture is the only infallible rule in matters of faith and practice. You and I need to test the spirits – to test the voices – that we hear in the world today, and to the extent that they align with Christ and His Word, they are trustworthy and reliable. However, to the extent that they deviate from the truth of Christ and what the Bible says is true, we need to refuse to believe them and call them out as false.

In our church's Lenten devotion for today it says that people define love in different ways. One person's idea of love may very well cause harm to another person. For example, think of the child who feels abandoned when a parent "falls in love" with someone who is not their spouse. Or the parent who does anything for her child "out of love" and is so doing spoils the child, creates codependency, and neglects the needs of other children in the community. If we create our own definitions of love, it becomes whatever a person wants it to be. This empties love of truth, and it no longer is grounded or has a center. The end result of self-defining love is not actually love at all. Rather, it is selfishness and confusion.

A Jesus-centered life and the authority of Scripture are the two keys to discerning the spirits and discriminating between truth and error. Focus on Christ and seek to align your life with the truth of His Word, and you'll be able to determine which voices are true and which ones are, in fact, false. God has not left Himself without a witness, and wise is the person who studies the Bible to understand the truth of God and avoid the kind of people and the false ways of thinking and living that can ruin your life.

Conclusion.

The apostle John's teaching in these passages can be summarized by the words "discerning love." We discern the times and we discern the spirits in order to live a life of discerning love. Understanding the times and knowing the truth of God enables us to put into practice what God wants us to do in loving well. And that

love flows out in generosity and sacrifice, which is the example Jesus gave us when He walked this earth and laid down His life for you and me on the cross.

During this pandemic of the coronavirus, what does love look like in real life? Last week I heard about a young woman who ventured out of her house and went to the grocery store. As she got out of her car, she noticed an elderly couple was sitting in their car in the parking lot and they looked like they were anxious or in some kind of difficulty. After studying them for a time, the young woman walked over to their car. The man rolled down his window, and the young woman asked if everything was okay. The older gentleman said, “We’re in our 80s, and they told us that we’re some of the vulnerable ones. My wife and I are afraid to get out of our car and go into the store. We don’t know what to do.”

The young woman asked them what they needed and said she’d be happy to get them their groceries. They handed her a list, and off she went into the store and purchased everything they needed. Then she rolled the shopping cart to their car, the man popped the trunk, and she loaded up the bags. They thanked her for her kindness and went on their way. I would suggest to you that’s what discerning love looks like.

Let’s live in discerning love in the coming week and ask the Lord to give you opportunities to shine like a light in the darkness. When the Apollo 13 oxygen tank failed and the lunar module was in danger of not returning to earth, Gene Kranz, the lead flight director, overheard people say that this could be the worst disaster NASA had ever experienced. Gene Kranz responded, “With all due respect, I believe this is going to be our finest hour.”

Gretchen Schmelzer writes: “Imagine if we could make our response to this crisis our finest hour. Imagine if a year or two from now we looked back on this and told the stories of how we came together in our community, in our state, in our nation and across the world. Your contribution to this finest hour may seem small, invisible, inconsequential, like staying at home. But every small act...will add up exponentially.”²

May this be our finest hour, friends, to the glory of God and the building of His kingdom. Amen.

Close with guided prayer....

¹ Leslie Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 242.

² Gretchen Schmelzer, PhD, personal internet post a friend shared with me.