

“Mission Impossible?

Written in Red”

1 John 5:9-13

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Faith Promise Missions Series

“This is the witness: God has given us the life of the age to come.”

- 1 John 5:11

Prayer of Preparation

O God, may we bear witness to your great love in Christ, living into the vision of that love for the world. Amen.

Message

The first time I went snorkeling was in Hawaii. Peggy and I and the children went there as part of a family trip. I was overwhelmed by the sight of the coral reef and fish. Face down in the Pacific Ocean, near Maui, I witnessed so many bright and beautiful colors. It was like a kaleidoscope – so vivid, so clear. Electric blues, vivid yellows, bright reds, and so many more. It was a marvel of God’s creation. So brilliant. So spectacular. Snorkeling brought me face to face with such beauty.

First John Review

Over the last four weeks, we have been reading through John’s First Letter, and we have been swimming, if you will, in some beautiful waters, coming close to the beauty of the gospel itself.

Indeed, by now, you may well be feeling as I did on that occasion when I went snorkeling *that we have been swimming in waters where there are so many things coming at us.*

In this particular letter, for example, you may have noticed how John keeps repeating and *double-repeating* several key themes, and how, on occasion, he keeps on sharing different variations on these themes. John wants us to make connections between them and try to enjoy each part, as each part helps us to see more or less directly all the other parts, and once we see all the parts we see the

beauty of the whole.¹ John wants us to know that by pointing out “this part” of the gospel, we may be able to see “that other part” of the gospel: believing that Jesus is God’s Son, for instance, we come see that God has indeed come in the flesh and died on the cross to forgive us and rescue us (1 John 3:13-14); and that, in doing so, we may become children of God, bound to obey and keep his commandments, which means offering ourselves sacrificially to God in mission, by loving God and loving others (1 John 3:1-7).

These are the bright colors we see in John’s Letter: when we focus on one part, we hopefully will see the beauty of all the other parts; and when we focus on all the other parts, we hopefully will realize the beauty of each part.

Focal Point: Red

Here at the end of the Letter, though, we see how all the parts come together, focusing more intensely on what the whole Letter is about, focusing, if you will, on the one color that stands out the brightest, or on the one color that brings clarity to the whole: the color red.

And the reason the color red is so important is because it reveals the price of God’s love in conquering sin and death on the cross. (1 John 5:4-5). Jesus’ crucifixion brings victory, but at a cost, the shedding of blood (1 John 5:4). Indeed, at Jesus’ crucifixion, this very victory comes by water, blood, and Spirit: when Jesus dies on the cross, both water and blood come from Jesus’ side (1 John 5:7, John 19:34). But the Spirit also bears witness to these facts. The Spirit testifies to God’s great love for us, and not only for us, but for the whole world (1 John 4:16, John 3:16).

In other words, *God’s great love is written in red*, but it is also drenched in water and soaked in the Spirit (1 John 5:9). The victory we have in Christ is the victory we have received by the One who overcomes sin through death.² As we have stated in other ways over the last four weeks: if we take this piece out of the picture, then the picture doesn’t make sense.

Jesus’ death defeats death. This is the testimony we share. Hopefully, this is the testimony on our hearts (1 John 5:10). God’s love-blood for the world is

¹ N.T. Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2011), 162.

² *Ibid.*, 164.

written in red.³ Not as show, not as a spectacle, but as a witness, as a reminder, of our own sinfulness and God's power to forgive it.

Power in the Blood

Perhaps I may overthink this point, but I can remember how, growing up, we would sing songs about how there was "power in the blood of Jesus."

Sometimes, I felt it was overdone (I will admit), but I can recall how such notions were theologically important, if not devotionally important, to persons like my grandparents, for example. "Nothing but the blood of Jesus." That's what we sang.

And then I read the hymns of Charles Wesley and realized how blood was very much emphasized. It was clearly stated: No blood, no atonement. No atonement, no salvation. Reminding us all that Jesus died a violent death on a cross and that his blood was "shed for me, even me"!

And yet, the church seems to be schizophrenic when it comes to Jesus shedding of blood on the cross: we either focus too unhealthily on it, or we don't focus on it all. Surely, there is a more meaningful way to engage what Jesus did for us than to ignore it entirely or concentrate on it only, to the exclusion of all the other parts.

Indeed, in some quarters of the church, this message of Christ's atoning death and sacrifice have simply been eliminated. One leading theologian by the name of H. R. Niebuhr made this point in the early 20th Century. Niebuhr basically thought that a bloodless gospel was no gospel at all, a form of cheap grace; he said that

"A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."⁴

In other words, we are people who fall short of God's glory, and we stand in judgment of God's love. As human beings, flawed and imperfect, we cannot establish the kingdom of God on our own. In fact, when we have tried, we have usually made matters worse. We cannot remain so delusional to think otherwise.

³ Thanks to *Homiletics* for several points here; cf., "Written in Red" (May 5, 1997) at www.homileticsonline.com.

⁴ H.R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Chicago, IL: Willett, Clark & Company, 1937), 54.

This is what First John is pressing: we all have ways of transgressing God's law, and we all have ways of thinking we are without fault or sin (1 John 1:6-7). The problem is that the cross stands in judgment on such thinking. The cross stands in judgment on our "bloody" hate.

We lie if we don't see this (1 John 1:8). Indeed, we lie if we don't believe that God has overcome it with his own primary colors of blood, water, and Spirit (1 John 5:8). We lie if we don't affirm that there is no power in such colors, especially in the color red, as such a color communicates that the shedding of blood is not about vengeance, or about novelty, but about *identification*.

God identifies with us in our sin by bleeding *for* us, by taking what we do wrong and rescuing us, bearing our pride and sin in his Son's body, but still abiding with us, still loving us (1 John 3:24). In this sense, God enters into the messiness of our own lives and knows us better than we know ourselves. God knows what we can do. In Jesus, God knows about how thirsty we can be for blood. God knows how we spill blood every day on the streets of this country and around the world. God knows how we can treat each other.

But God also knows hope by resurrection, and God also knows the overcoming of death by love (1 John 5:10).

This is the *life-affirming way of God*, and it is the way that makes what we seek to do in *mission possible*: not by taking us away from our challenges in mission, but by taking us *to* and *through* our challenges in mission.

This is the kind of *love-blood* that Christ sheds for us, the kind that actually brings us together around a Table and makes us all children of God – children who don't need to be protected from the ugliness of sin, but children who know the truth about who we are and what we are capable of doing, both good and bad.

Stated another way: if God's love is written in red for the world to see, then there is really no hiding it. If anything, we need to find ways of understanding it, and then find ways of sharing it.

Closing Notes

As parents, Peggy and I have tried to share with our own children just how we are to understand and confront our challenges in life, even our hurts and disappointments. Living as we would in a parsonage, we knew from the beginning

how our children would see all kinds of human behavior, not because it was a parsonage but simply because of the public nature of our lives.

Our philosophy, right or wrong, was not to protect our children from this kind of “stuff,” or to sanitize what people could do or say, but simply to share that this is how we all can speak and act from time to time, regardless of where we live and that part of growing is to learn how to deal with it. There is no reason to hide it, or to admit it does not exist.

Instead, the challenge is to understand it and engage it, and to realize that Jesus’ blood and water and Spirit are thicker than any behavior not in keeping with Jesus’ own example (1 John 3:5).

There is no use in trying to clean this up: after all, a cross is a very messy affair. And God’s testimony to this “messy affair” is written in red, revealing that our salvation was not achieved through a bloodless coup, but through costliness of life itself, Jesus’ own life for you and for me. For our mission and life together.

Indeed, it was written in red that we may come to a table so that we might receive life and life eternal through him. Amen.