

Sermon on the First Letter of John, 12.03.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Dear Congregation,

Today we do not have one, but the First Letter of John in front of us, which is not written by the disciple and presumably also not by the Evangelist John, but probably by an elder, a well-regarded teacher. It is rather less a letter, more so a treatise. Altogether, there are three Letters of John; I shall preach about the other two next week. All three are very close to the Gospel of John, for this reason they have probably received the name. There are, however, linguistic and factual differences, therefore, as mentioned before, it cannot be the same author as that of the Gospel of John. Exactly where the congregations were, to whom this treatise was sent and where this John lived, one does not know, it may have been in Asia Minor or Syria.

The members of the congregation were in a somewhat similar situation as in our time. Faith in Christ no longer belonged to the most popular world ideologies, there are a great deal of other ideologies, on which people set their hearts. At that time, people much rather believed in a Greek salvation philosophy named "Gnosis". The followers of this philosophy said: "We have come into the world with a divine spark which dwells within us. That is what remains of us in the end. This part, which is divine, returns to God. Unfortunately, we must live right on this earth, where this divine characteristic does not even belong. Therefore, we are placed into a kind of imprisonment, from which we are liberated one day. The only good thing is: Here on earth we can pretty well do anything we want, for in the end, we shall return to God anyway. Therefore, we live to the fullest, there is not the flood after us, but the paradise."

What do you say, dear Congregation, it does not sound so bad for people who want to be religious and, at the same time, want to enjoy life to the fullest. Yet, this has nothing in the least to do with Christian faith and Christian theology.

But the First Letter of John puts up something very different against this: God's love, but in connection with the love for the neighbour. It is, then, according to the Biblical testimony, not the case that one can only concentrate on taking the maximum for oneself. People who only live according to the pleasure principle and do not care for their neighbour, do not contribute the least to a better world. Love, so says this letter, is not just a nice feeling, but an obligation towards the neighbour. Time and again it is repeated: "Love your brother!"

As little as the congregation should adapt to the world, as much should Christians pay attention to helping, supporting and loving each other.

What does that mean to us? I think the first thing that brings this about is, that we must ask ourselves perhaps now: Do we love the people around us?

Recently I role-played with the confirmands what happens when one, in the relationships with God, the neighbour and ourselves, omits one element. Let us say, we forget God. Well, then there is no longer an authority which talks to our conscience and tells us this is not the way. In the Letters of John it is formulated like this, that people, who no longer have God in their vision, stumble about in darkness. In a moment, I will come back to this.

If one forgets the neighbour, one can probably still pray in spite of that, but only for oneself. This week I heard a radio report on Tommy Douglas. Douglas was Premier of Saskatchewan from 1944 to 1961. Last year he was voted the greatest Canadian. He was, before he became a politician, a Baptist preacher. In a flaming speech about the social injustices in Canada, he said that people go home and pray for themselves, their wives and perhaps for little Johnny, and that's it. He has described this more or less as hypocritical behaviour, and I think that this is correct.

Our life should take place within an even-sided triangle, connected with the love of God, the love of the neighbour and the love of ourselves. And that is really good. Do we not find it highly reassuring that God loves us, or that someone in the family or the congregation folds their hands or stands at our side, cares, looks after us, loves us?

Life, this the psychologists have confirmed, what the Bible has already known for a long time, is a search for love. And this need of wanting to be loved never ends. – I want to make it clear to all of us, that love is not simply just a romantic feeling. Love is the content of our life, this says the First Letter of John and comes to a fine point with the question: If you do not love, then you no longer live in light but in darkness.

9)He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. 10)He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling. 11)But he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Some people say, love makes blind. I do not believe this, because love changes us from short-sighted people, who can hardly perceive anything beyond their noses, into far-sighted people, who suddenly grasp the full meaning of life. Hate makes blind, love, however, opens the eyes.

But let me come to a second important connection and a beautiful example of love, which is meant in the Letter of John, when it says here:

7)Beloved, let us now love one another, for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. 8)He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. 9)In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God has sent his only son into the world, so that we might live through him. 10)In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the expiation for our sins. 11)Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

The reason for our love among ourselves is not that we are such good people or in any case and always have loved everyone already, but that we experience God's love and so very much rejoice in it, so that we pass this on to others.

And that you can see at a single glance where this love of God, as it says in a German hymn, falls into a person and forms concentric circles.

I have experienced it at the bedside of a dying person this week, how lovingly the daughter has taken care of him, not out of a feeling of duty, not from sentimentality, which sometimes takes hold of people, too, when they know these are now the last precious moments with the family member, but simply and movingly out of love.

And that is something that fills this room, into which one is taken as a visitor. At that moment, one cannot escape this atmosphere. I find it somewhat difficult to describe what it is exactly that surrounds one, but it is as if God were so near that one could touch him, where people love each other so sincerely and honestly.

The great thing in the Letters of John is, that they, more or less, remain with this topic. Surely, the congregation has its problems with false teachings. Then as today, it is certainly not easy to love everyone all the time. But ultimately, it is the only possibility to bring one's life here on earth in harmony with God and – as far as it is up to us – to live with others.

Recently, I have heard a nice little story, which clarifies once again, which kind of love is described in the Letter of John.

There were three little boys, who fought among themselves who is most loved by his mother. The first little chap said: Well, I found 25 cents a while ago and gave it to my mother. But my mother loves me so much that she gave me the money right back and said, I can buy sweets for myself. O, said the next, that is really nothing. My mother loves me much more than your mother loves you. When I found 25cents a while ago, she did not only give me back the coin, but she gave me another 25 cents, and I could buy myself twice as many candies. The third was quiet for a little while, and finally he said: Well, I think of our three mothers mine loves me most, because when I gave her 25 cents the other day, which I had found, she took it into her hand, stroked my head, smiled, put the 25 cents into her pocket and said: Thank you, this helps us a lot to pay our bills.

Love is not giving something and receiving the same back like in a trade. Love, most people think, is also not something that one has invested into someone and receives twice as much back. Love is not a business; but love is something that one gives away without expecting something back, but experiences how much someone rejoices in it, even though we may regard it as a small, minor thing.

I think we have found out something about love here, which we, for once, should seriously think about. Amen.

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.