

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 2, 2021

Psalm 150:1–6 (ESV):

Let Everything Praise the Lord

150 Praise the LORD!

Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens!
2 Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his excellent greatness!

3 Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!

4 Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!

5 Praise him with sounding cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

6 Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD!

First Reading: Acts 8:26–40 (ESV):

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. 27 And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” 30 So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 31 And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,

so he opens not his mouth.

33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

34 And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. 36 And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” 38 And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39 And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

EPISTLE: 1 John 4:1–21 (ESV):

Test the Spirits

4 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. 4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. 5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

God Is Love

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we have loved

God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.

16 So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love,

and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

17 By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as

he is so also are we in this world.

18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in

love.

19 We love because he first loved us.

20 If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love

God whom he has not seen.

21 And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

THE GOSPEL - John 15:1–8 (ESV):

I Am the True Vine

15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. **2** Every branch in me that does

not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may

bear more fruit. **3** Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in

the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. **5** I am the vine; you are the branches.

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you

can do nothing. **6** If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and

wITHERS; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. **7** If you abide

in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Sermon 18 – Fifth Sunday of Easter

"Test the Words"

1 John 4:1-11

Dear friends,

John talks about spirits and love in our epistle lesson. He talks about testing, and he gives us the criteria that we use to do so. What does he mean, though? Its easy for this to sound mystical, strange, not like something we experience in this world. The opposite is true, though. You and I are surrounded by spirits, but as creepy or disconnected from reality as that statement sounds, I'll show you what I mean. Why talk about this? Because it keys into important Christian truths, as John himself says, and is important in our Christian love, as John also says. Love doesn't come from nowhere, we can force it, but that only lasts so long. The best kind of love is one that is grown. John shows us this too.

In chapter 3 of this letter, John talks about these concepts in a different way. He tells us that love comes from the love of God abiding in us, and urges us to also abide in love. Abiding is just hanging out, staying there, sitting in your easy chair on a nice summer day. That's abiding. You're sat down, and you aren't getting up for anything. Abiding. That's how John describes the love of God within us. It is just sat there and it isn't moving, it isn't going to leave. It has moved in and is there to stay. John then moves, in this chapter, to talk about how that love abides in us. How does God move in? That's what John is talking about here.

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” This is what I was talking about earlier. Spirits? It makes it sound like the apostles were regularly talking to otherworldly creatures. It equally sounds like he expects us to be doing so. John makes it sound like interacting with spirits should be part of our daily agenda. Get to work. Get a coffee. Talk to spirits. It seems silly, old-fashioned, made up even. We are just people dealing with people and the things of this world. But if you look at what he says later, I think John is talking about just that. Dealing with people, interacting with the ideas and

the information that we take in throughout the day. He's just using a way that sounds strange to us to talk about it.

Think about it. Based on what the Scriptures tell us, what has a spirit in this earth? The rivers don't. The rocks don't. The animals don't seem to either. We do, the angels do, the devil does, the demons do. But based on what we can see and touch, it's just us. There's one thing that has spirits in this world, and that's us. So what John is telling us is this: Don't believe every person out there, but test them. That sounds much more sensible, doesn't it? This is something we do every day. We test what we hear, we use our good sense, we use the data we have, we use other things we can find out, to figure out if what we're hearing is good information or not. All John is doing here is asking you to take this same principle and apply it to your faith. Test what you hear about God, test what you hear about this world, about what is virtuous, what is evil. Don't believe it because it sounds good, test it instead.

Why? John himself tells you. Many false prophets have gone out into the world. These will not strengthen your faith. They will not tell you the truth. They will lie, leave out things that are important, emphasize the wrong thing. All of this is something every human does, it doesn't seem sinister, it just seems like... us. Who we are as sinners. As true as that is, a false prophet is something else. Something much worse. A false prophet can lead your entire faith down the wrong path, believing 100% of the time that they are right, that they are true. That is what makes this dangerous, and makes these words of John, strange though they sound, all the more imperative for us today. We live in an age that thinks itself smarter than it really is. People today think they know so much better and are so much more virtuous than we really are. Enlightenment isn't exactly a lie, but I remind you that when you have too much light, you can't really see. Too much light is blinding. You need the right kind of light for the right kind of environment. That's what John is saying. We don't just need to know things, we need to hear the right things. That's what false prophets cannot give you.

So what are those right things? Well, John is helpful enough to tell you. **“2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.”** There you go. The Spirit of God is in those who confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. That is about as simple as it gets, but its bewildering to put it into practice, at least at first. So, am I never to believe anyone who isn't Christian? No, and John will talk about that later. Remember, this is for your faith. If someone gives you good advice about what to do with your money, take it, you don't have to cross-examine them to find out if they recite the Nicene Creed at church. This isn't about your worldly life, at least not primarily, this is about your faith. And it boils down to good sense. When it comes to your Christianity, listen to the Spirit of God. This is found in God's Word, the Bible. This is found in your fellow Christians. This is found in our worship together. We are here, you and I, for each other's faith. We are here to help sharpen and strengthen it. Make sure, when you're informing what you believe as a Christian, that you are tapping into good sources. Don't just drink from whatever well sounds best at the time, test the waters first. If you notice a book that seems like it would be good for devotions, ask yourself who wrote it? What's their agenda, what's their bias? Will it help or hurt my faith? If you're listening to a speaker at a different church, key in on what they say about Jesus. Do they say He came in the flesh? Are they talking about Him a lot, or is Jesus just being used as excuse for them to talk about what they want to talk about? Now what do they say about the Bible? Is it the Word of God, or do we need to dissect it like a specimen on a lab table? You get the picture. Mindlessly absorbing data is something we do all day, and we have filters on for what we actually think about so we don't have to think about it all. Your faith could use one too, and let it be a quietly questioning one. Not skeptical, but not just opening wide and taking it all in either. Listen to what is said.

Again, this is intimidating. I often talk about a world so full of lies that finding truth is about as easy as finding your glasses during a power outage. God does not want us to be impolitely skeptical of non-Christian people because they are not Christian. God does not expect you to retreat into your little Christian bubble and never see, hear, or think about anything else. When you go to refresh your faith, make sure your getting it from the right source. Knowing what that is can be tough, but John has words for you: **“4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. 5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”** Relax a bit. You know more than you think when it comes to God and the Bible. We can always be wrong, of course, but the more you take in the good stuff, the Spirit of God, the more you get a sense of what doesn't fit. I've seen you saints do this from time to time. You'll hear something, or read something, and come to me and say, pastor, that just doesn't sound quite right. And more often than not, you're right, because it ain't quite on target. John is quite flat. The people that are good for your faith, the words that are good for your faith, are those that listen to the apostles. Since the apostles are currently quite dead, this means that the good ones listen to God's Word. The Gospels. The epistles. All those weird books in the Old Testament. That is who is from God, the ones who pay heed and respect the Word of God as the supreme authority.

But we're all sinners, pastor! No one does this perfectly. Yeah, I know. That's what makes this hard, messy, and that's why we have to rely on God for it. You are correct that we can never really get the truth 100% right 100% of the time. But God does, and He can transmit that truth to us. God's truth is bigger than our sin, more powerful. God's smarts are bigger than our dumb. God's Word is far too potent to be stopped by our distractions, our sins, and other things. So take comfort if you feel like you always get it wrong. You

may always get it wrong. But God gets it right, and He gives you that right truth every time.

It is this basis that forms the foundation for our love, as John continues. I can't really talk about this in depth without starting a whole other sermon, so I won't. All I will say is that this gives us some motivation, some reason, for spending so much time trying to get at the right sources. Why be so picky about what we hear, what we use, for our faith? Because our love begins and ends with our faith. The reason we can love our neighbor like John says we should is because God first loved us, and the reason that love of God is there for us is because we believe it. Without faith, there is no real love. It may look like love, sound like love, smell like love, but without faith, it is hollow and without meaning. With faith, love becomes shining, true, and deep. That faith comes to us in words, through words. It is by words we believe, and there are many human spirits speaking a great many words these days. We believe the ones that tell us that Jesus loves us, that Jesus lived for us, died for us, and still reigns in heaven for us. We believe the ones that tell us that Jesus will come back for us, that He gives Himself to us in the Bible, in the font, in the bread and wine. We believe the things Jesus repeatedly tells us to believe. For our faith, hearing those things is crucial. We take that belief and transform it love, and we rarely do it well. But that faith is itself telling us that doing it well does not save us. Doing it well doesn't define us.

So what spirits do you hear? Both. No one hears all good spirits or all bad spirits. There's enough of both in this world. For the world, listen to the world's advice. For God, listen to that which tells you about Jesus, tells you about His love for you. That is the Spirit of God, and you can find it, its always there for you. It is always there to help you sort out the good from the bad. Make use of Him.

Amen.