

## Let's Stay Together

Luke Bushman, April 14th, 1 John 3:1-7

Good morning, it is good to be here together. I hope everyone is enjoying the change of weather. I know I have. I titled this sermon Let's Stay Together, because it fits with the lectionary passage, and more importantly it is also the name of a great Al Green song that everyone should listen to. Our text today comes from 1 John, and can be interpreted in many ways, while also calling for unity.

One of the things that I find difficult when approaching scripture, is that there are always multiple options regarding what someone can focus on. Within a specific text, or a biblical book, or even the Bible as a whole. It is the same when we consider the wide range of believers and what these different groups focus on, within the same faith tradition. When I come to this 1 John text, I feel there are three themes woven throughout the seven verses. I have highlighted some phrases that show these three themes.

**SLIDE** In blue you have this thread of followers being children of God. In purple you have this idea of a mysterious unrevealed future for followers. In yellow the author is speaking out against sin. Within these 7 verses a person could construct a sermon about how nice it is to be a child of God, or about the mysterious return of Jesus, or a call to repentance.

If we look at the large wide world of Christians, we realize very quickly that we are not all on the same page. Often when Christians are not on the same page, words like heresy, judgemental, wolf in sheep's clothing get tossed around. I think it is often easier to discount someone's different opinion, than to look at how they got there and really wrestle with our differences. More often than not, people arrive where they are, because they focus on a different theme or thread of thinking when they encounter scripture. But how do we move forward with unity and love in our own circles when we don't look at things the same way?

While this text can go different ways in regards to our focus, it also gives us some clues as to how we can stay together when we see things differently. Whether that is what we focus on when we come across a text like this, or just in general principle, which is what John is talking about here. **SLIDE**

## 1. Seeing one another as children of God

Three times in these seven verses followers are referred to as God's children. This reference to kinship is definitely meant to create an attitude of love and kinship to those around us. If the people around us who we disagree with are to be viewed as family that changes things a lot. I cannot count the amount of times I fought with my siblings growing up, and we honestly still have our points of contention and disagreement. Yet that sibling relationship is often different than any of my other relationships. There is a mutual commitment to staying together, because we are family. It is a big shift in our outlook to view other believers as family with the same parent. That is the radical call that scripture regularly makes. Jesus says something similar in Matthew 12:46-50: **SLIDE**

**While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."**

**He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."**

**SLIDE** Jesus viewed his disciples as family members. We all know the disciples' shortcomings. They had doubts, they tried to take advantage of Jesus, they betrayed Jesus, they abandoned Jesus. And yet Jesus calls them his family. That is probably the only way that you can explain how they stayed together. I think family and marriage are often our main relationships that can endure the most severe disagreement and hurt. Even then it is not always the case. While we are in kinship with one another, we are also in kinship with God. We pick up a lot of traits from our parents, and we sometimes even listen to them. This reminder of who our family is, is very helpful not just for treating one another with love, but it also reminds us of who we look up to. Who our role model is. When we are in an environment of love we are more likely to thrive, and when we have good role models we are more likely to be like them. I like this family metaphor because it pushes back on some of the more rigid thinking regarding our

separation from God. It can be hard to bother trying to be like someone if you are constantly told how far above you they are. This family metaphor promotes a love of self, a love of others, and a love for God. **SLIDE**

## 2. Fulfilling our responsibility to one another

While love as family is great and makes us feel comforted, there are also some responsibilities that come with being in a family. This comes up in these verses when it talks about “purity”, “righteousness”, and “knowing no sin”. I often struggle with the language of sin and righteousness, because those words often carry a lot of weight. The concept of sin can sometimes lead us to look at ourselves poorly, and as inherently bad. The goal of righteousness can feel like a massive weight- an aspiration that we cannot achieve. Perhaps others are more comfortable with these phrases, but I often immediately feel shame and inadequacy when these topics are brought up.

There are two things that keep me grounded when I start exploring the concept of sin and righteousness. First, to me the Bible conveys that love is the default posture of our creator. The push to pursue righteousness and avoid sin is not a threat where love is withheld. It is a loving reminder that as followers we have a responsibility to one another, and our life together is better if we are willing to take on that responsibility. Which brings me to the second thing that keeps me grounded when I start thinking about sin and righteousness. More often than not scripture seems to use communal, pluralized language when talking about sin and righteousness. This epistle like most was written to a group of people- not an individual. Personal piety is important, but I can often freeze when the Bible tells me to be pure. What does that mean? Because purity has meant different things through the ages. Can I go to the movies? Am I dressing in a holy way? This can get very overwhelming really quickly. When I apply this language to a communal sense, I find it becomes much easier. Doing right by others, being kind, and interacting with others in a respectful way, are goals that seem a lot clearer to me. C. Clifton Black has this to say about the difference between pursuing holiness out of fear or pursuing holiness from a positive place: **SLIDE**

**“We abide in him, not out of dread that our identity as God’s children will be stripped from us, but in order that our confidence may be bolstered, that at his coming we may not shrink from him in shame...The child of God is a responsible agent and is responseable—enabled to respond—by the endowment of God’s prevenient love.”**

There does not need to be a sense of dread or fear. We can function out of a posture of love and responsibility. Jesus plays a two fold role in our purification, or repentance, or righteousness or whatever you might call it. For the author of 1 John, Jesus not only purifies us on a cosmic mysterious level, but by following in his footsteps now we are made better people. The ways of Jesus provide a framework for how we can live righteously in the here and now. The sacrifice of Jesus makes us pure in a future, heavenly, metaphysical sense. **SLIDE**

### 3. Embracing the mystery and the unknown

Which brings us to the third theme in these seven verses, and the third thing that can help stay together. Repeatedly the author of 1 John uses this word “revealed”. There are some things that will be revealed, and some things that have already been revealed. Christ HAS been revealed to us. We know the teachings of Jesus, the ways of JEsus and the life of Jesus. Because Jesus has been revealed to us, we have a pretty good idea regarding any future revelations about Jesus. Specifically, it says that Jesus was revealed to take away sins. What is yet to be revealed is what we will be like when Jesus returns- or what the Kingdom of God will look like specifically. While we don’t know what the future holds, we know that we will be like Jesus. We have an idea of that means now, but we will have a fuller picture of Jesus in the future. There is so much mystery in this life, and so much unknown. I think it can be helpful to name that. I think if we are able to embrace the unknown, we can be made more humble. We are able to use phrases like “I don’t know”, or “I am not sure” or “I think that maybe”. I find these phrases to be more conducive to staying together than “you are wrong”.

C. Clifton Black has this to say about how the unknown inspires us. “In both letters [1 John and 1 Corinthians] a sense of incompleteness spurs Christians’ persistence in Christ and reminds them that their perception of God (or of Christ) will someday be perfected”.

There are lots of things that we cannot know or understand. We don’t need to give up looking, or resort to fighting. We can use the unknown to give us a sense of exploration in our searching. We can think about the things that we don’t know, and when someone thinks differently, we know we are on a journey together. We know they are looking for the same thing we are. Trying to understand the unknown gives us humility, and also gives us a common goal shared with others.

Staying together is difficult sometimes. In fact it is probably sometimes impossible, unrealistic, or maybe even unhealthy depending on the situation. However, I think we can all think of circumstances where staying together has required some effort. If we gave up on staying together every time things got difficult we would have no one left. The global church has unfortunately not always been a positive example. There are thousands of denominations, and many churches have long histories of why they do not get along. While different denominations may exist for good reasons, unity and togetherness is still possible, even if we exist in different institutions. We live in a divided world and it often feels easier to discount, cut off, or generalize people instead of pursuing relationships.

If we choose to start on the hard journey of staying together in some sort of capacity, the author of 1 John has given us some ideas for how we can do that. We can start by looking at people as children of God. Creatures made in God’s image, worthy of love and respect just like us. People seem more willing to fight for a relationship when it is their own family. It may be hard or unnatural, but adopting a kinship mindset can help us continue loving others even in their shortcomings.

We can also work to stay together by fulfilling our responsibilities to our fellow children of God. Even if our right treatment of others is not reciprocated, we can only control our actions. We can try being good, righteous, and sinless to one another, and perhaps that will encourage

others to do the same. Hopefully knowing we are loved helps us pass on that love.

Finally, if we can embrace the unknown and the mysterious, we embrace a posture of humility. There is so much we do not know, and if we acknowledge that, we can hopefully be open to listening to others. This also puts us on a common path with believers we disagree with- we are all just on a journey to understand things that have not been revealed to us yet. I hope as followers of Christ we are marked by our desire to stay together. Whether it is in our families, marriages, friendships, churches or with the global church. Seeking unity can be difficult, and hopefully we have the tools to take on that task.

### **Works Cited**

Black, Clifton C. *The New Interpreter's® Bible in Twelve Volumes, Volume XII (Hebrews; James; 1 & 2 Peter; 1, 2, & 3 John; Jude; Revelation)*, Abingdon Press, 1998