

April 24, 2016 “An Old Man's Insight” 1 jOHN 4:7-12

You know I like to tell stories. So bear with me as I share this one. Anne Rice is an extremely successful author. She first won fame with her novel, “The Vampire Chronicles” in the 1970's. About a decade ago she spoke of a “new spiritual beginning” (her words) as she re-embraced the Christian faith of her youth. She began writing a series of books about the life of Jesus, and she tells the story of her spiritual journey in a book entitled Out Of Darkness. However, in 2010 she announced her decision to quit being a Christian. She said that in her experience Christians are “quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous.” Almost sounds like she had attended a Presbyterian General Assembly.

Here is the intriguing part. She reaffirmed her commitment to Jesus Christ, but added, “Following Christ does not mean following his followers.” The fact is, a lot of people feel that way about Christians. One man said in print, “Have you ever watched those preachers on television? They seem to be angry all the time! Many affirm that they believe in God...they just can't take the church. The disagreements that get really ugly and leave people wounded with a considerable amount of so called, “collateral damage”. We have to be willing to own, that at times we are more eager to engage in debate...with a take no prisoners attitude. Some of these comments are taken from the work of the American preacher Andy Stanley. A person who attended a meeting at which Stanley said some of these things remarked, “I've finally found a preacher who sees the church the way I do!”

Something awful has happened along the way, as years turned into decades and then centuries, and finally millenia. The word Christian is not held in high regard over a majority of the world

in our time and has lost much of its meaning in our own nation. That's part of the reason for this series. If we are going to understand the world, over there, and in our own neighbourhoods we need to recognize something has happened to the word Christian. As a Skidoo was once a yellow and black motorized snow sled, and then skidooing became winter activity of using motorized snow machines, and then descriptive of any motorized sled, so Christian as a word has come to mean many things outside the sacred walls of our church buildings.

It is the refrain of this series. Christian was a word invented by non-Christians to designate people like us. At one point it became a capital offence in the Roman Empire to be a Christian, caught in the practices of our faith. And then a miracle occurred. It was not one of those, pray for a person, and he or she is instantly healed, gets up, takes his or her bedroll and goes home miracles. It took 300 years but it happened. By the end of the 3rd century people wanted to be Christian more than anything else. Christian, meaning Biblical values became the most popular lifestyle in the world. How did that happen? So we turn to an old man's insight.

But before I turn to that one more thing. What happened to the 12 disciples? We know that Judas died at his own hand as he tried to cope and could not cope with what he had done in his betrayal of Jesus. Peter travelled to Rome. There he was crucified head downward. James stayed in Jerusalem and Judea. One of the Herods had him beheaded approximately in the year 44. Andrew travelled to Scythia, Greece and Asia Minor and was crucified on what we now call a St. Andrew's cross. Philip died a martyr in Hierapolis. Bartholomew travelled to Armenia. He was whipped until he died.

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Thomas went to Parthia, Persia and India. He was martyred in Madras, at Mount St. Thomas. Matthew died as a martyr in Ethiopia. James the brother of Jesus was crucified in Egypt. Jude died a martyr's death in Persia. Simon Zelotes, was crucified. Mathias, who was elected an apostle to replace Judas, was martyred in Ethiopia. Saul, who is the apostle Paul reached Rome, as a result of his appeal to Caesar preached to Caesar's household chained to a Roman soldier. He was beheaded in Rome in the year 67.

And then there was the disciple John. He is the only disciple/apostle of Jesus to survive to advanced years. He became old. You will remember that John was commissioned by Jesus to care for His mother Mary. He did so for the rest of His life. But in his 90's John was banished to the Isle of Patmos, a prison camp. There he wrote and smuggled out his Revelation, a word of encouragement to the suffering church. Ultimately he was set free. He is the only disciple of that early era, identified as such in the Gospels to die a natural death. In the year 90 he wrote these words for all who follow Jesus. "Let us love one another for love is of God."

It is tempting to say "that's nice" and then look for something really important in this 1st letter of John. It is far more than nice. In fact it is gold. "Let us love one another for love is of God." I am making the claim this is the insight that literally changed the world's view of followers of Jesus, the disciples in 3 centuries. Think about it! It is a really important question. How did a group of people with no power, no influence, no political leverage, no money...none of these guys or the women around them were so wealthy as to be able to buy influence with the world of their time. How is it that in three centuries the city of Rome went from not

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having a Christian symbol in it, to being a city in which you can not look in any direction without seeing crosses that celebrate the cross of Christ. They adorn the rooftops of churches. They are inset in walls. They are part of historical plaques and memorabilia. The dominant symbol of the capital of the Empire. And while the Empire would pass away...those symbols of the Christian faith have remained. And the world has travelled to that city to see them, to touch them.

To taste the wonder of the saving power of Jesus. How did that happen?

Many historians have written on the subject, trying to reduce it to human means. Paul was a great preacher, probably the greatest evangelist. But Rome killed him. Silenced him. Rome crucified Peter. I read you the list of the New Testament martyrs. Thousands upon thousands were fed to the lions and otherwise put to death in a time when the Christian faith was held in disrepute. What drew people to faith in Jesus? What changed the world of that time such that no one worships Jupiter any more. No one. And yet, Jesus name is known throughout the world. Honoured by groups of worshippers on every continent. Despised by many too. It is estimated that there have been more Christians put to death for simply believing in Jesus in the last century and a half than in all of world history to date. What changed that it became respected and respectable to be a disciple of Jesus?

I am convinced it is this old man's insight. John's insight. "Let us love one another, for love is of God." Let us love one another even unto death if necessary...because love comes from and is generated out of the very nature of God Almighty, creator of the world, revealed in flesh and blood in the person of Jesus Christ who

was crucified and rose the 3rd day to save sinners from their sin.

The insights of this passage based on what Jesus said at the last supper, are simply stupendous. John is addressing believers. Disciples of Jesus. Christians who have made the conscious choice to be followers of Jesus. And what John says to them based on that last lesson of Jesus in the upper room is this. Lets choose to love people. Beginning with fellow believers, lets choose to love one another because love is not the right thing to do...this is not about choosing some superior morality, it is (capital letter) the Godly thing to do. It is the way God treats people, even when people do not. God loves. We are God's servants. Lets do what God does.

He goes on to say, here is the acid test. “Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” People who do not love others, do not know God because God is in His essence the power to love others. What John is saying is loving people is not about making the intellectual decision to ascribe to this ethic, a rule, a law...he is saying, loving others is about choosing to be like God and letting His power work in us toward other people. And to be sure the old man with all his experience, with all of his friends gone and having died horrible deaths, he says here is the Gospel connection. Understand... “this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Loving others is living life the way God lived in sending Jesus among us, dying for us, dying to redeem us.

And here lies the answer to my question, what happened to change things so radically, that being a disciple of Jesus became more important than doing what was safe, to stay alive in a hostile environment. “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another,

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God lives in us, and His love is made complete in us.” You want to make God visible to other people...love them like nobody else loves them except God revealed in Jesus. That's why there were no rebellions led by the disciples of Jesus, the Christians as they were called in Antioch.

What did the disciples, the so called Christians do? Well for starters they treated people who had no standing in the Empire, the sick, the diseased, slaves and servant classes, women with a degree of respect and compassion that some literally stood back and said, “Wow!” I'm not sure I want to be a Christian, but would I ever like to see my daughter find a man who would love her, the way they love their women. Did you know the Roman Empire had an awful lot of unwanted children. People would abandon them at river sites. The disciples of Jesus, Christians, would gather them up and feed them and clothe them and care for them. Love them. Widows were a throw away sub class of women. The Christians would gather them, care for them, feed them, clothe them, and not abuse them. The sick were regularly discarded to die. The Christians took them in. Fed them clothed them, sheltered them, until the last if it came, buried them as though they were family. Some of them were healed in that caring environment. And there were those who said, “Wow, you have to give those Christians credit. They really know how to love people. They had no wealth. They had no power. They were hunted and despised. And in 300 years they changed the world.

And what changed? We began to believe it was a good thing (maybe even a first priority to be wealthy, and to wield power. And the rot has set in and it runs deep. And the word Christian has become a word that means decent, holier than thou, disputatious, child abusers. The same or as bad as the rest of the world. An old

man's insight. "God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives in Him and he in God.....we love, because He first loved us." That new commandment Jesus gave in the upper room is pure gold. It changes everything including the world.

Let us pray;

Dear Jesus, as followers of Jesus, strip us of our dependance on power and money and stratagies that we devise. Fill us with that Christ quality that loves others sacrificially. Open our eyes to opportunity and help us to spend the one currency that really matters. Help us to love the way you love, in the power of your Spirit, and the power of your name. Amen