

FAITH CONQUERS THE WORLD

I John 5:1-5

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on The Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 9, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, during a time in which COVID restrictions were still limiting attendance.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

We are in the midst of a “mini-series” on the First Epistle of John, which, as I describe the Bible as more like a library than a book, rests on the hard-to-reach top shelf in the back room where few people visit and check it out. But all three of these Epistles of John have value, if for nothing more than the short phrases and sentences that have formed the focus of this sermon series.

I.

In the passage we have read for today, three times in a sentence-and- a-half the phrase *conquers the world* appears. Each time the phrase appears, the subject of the verb *conquer* is related to our faith:

...whatever is born of God conquers the world.

And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.

Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

The promise of this phrase is that the faith we have in Jesus Christ is an *essential* if not the *sole* element that joins with

- *Divine intervention*
- *Human ingenuity*
- *Determined will power*
- *and sheer good fortune*

to bring us some form of *victory* in the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

To say *faith conquers the world* is to promise that in the end, we exercise some form of *control* over the situation that is upon us, some form of *choice and agency* within the condition into which we have been born or transported.

Faith conquers the world. Our faith. Our faith in God. The faith that God gives us. Faith conquers the world.

II.

It is important when we use a word like *conquer* – particularly in reference to faith – that we do not mean *dominate*. There have been times in the history of Christianity – and other religions as well – when our forefathers and foremothers have sought to *dominate* the world with their faith. They have even succeeded, sometimes for several centuries. But the results are nearly always mixed at best.

- It took the Renaissance and Reformation to upend the excesses of power and corruption in the linkage of church and crown in the Holy Roman Empire.
- It took in turn the tenets of the Enlightenment to upend the excesses of the Reformation in Geneva and Salem, Massachusetts, and many of those Enlightenment tenets themselves can be traced back to the Creation Story in Genesis,¹ the humanitarian nature of the Ten Commandments, and the ideals of the Sermon on the Mount embodied and spoken by Jesus whom we believe to be the Christ.²

When the writer of First John speaks of faith *conquering the world*, he is not referring to *dominance*. He is, after all, writing from prison in a Greco-Roman culture in which he is a minority. *Dominating* the world was the furthest thing from his mind and it can be the furthest thing from ours as well, as we seek not to *dominate* the public square but rather *participate* in it, not to *force* on others our vision of the Kingdom of God on earth so much as strive to *persuade* them of its validity.

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It is also important that when we use a word like *conquer*, we do not simply mean *survive*.

- Survival is nearly always *necessary* before conquering can begin.
- In some instances, survival *is* a form of conquering.

Yet we yearn for those times when *faith leads us not just to survive, but to conquer: to conquer* whatever it is in the world that we are facing, whatever it is that is holding us back and holding us down, whatever it is God has given us to take on.

We yearn for a faith that conquers, not just survives, the world.

II.

Some of you know that I am a fan of the Book of Ecclesiastes, known in Hebrew as *Qoheleth*, which means *the assembly* or *the person who gathers the assembly*; hence, its English subtitle: *The Preacher*.³

Whatever name we call the book, Ecclesiastes contains recollections of a wise but disillusioned thinker who, nearing the end of his life, looks back over the variety of experiences by which he has sought a meaningful life.

I, the Teacher...applied my mind to seek and to search out by *wisdom* all that is done under heaven...
And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. [Yet] I perceived that

¹ Genesis 1.

² In Tom Holland's book, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), he makes and repeats this point strongly.

³ See Eunhy P. Lee, "Ecclesiastes," *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 929-930.

this...is but a *chasing after wind*...

I said to myself, 'Come now, I will make a test of *pleasure*; enjoy yourself.' But again, this also was vanity.

I said of *laughter*, 'It is mad', and of *pleasure*, 'What use is it?'

I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with *wine*...

I made *great works*;

I built *houses* and planted *vineyards* for myself;

I made myself *gardens* and *parks*, and planted in them all kinds of *fruit trees*.

I made myself *pools* from which to water the forest of growing trees...

Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no *pleasure*, for my heart found pleasure in all my *toil*, and this was my *reward* for all my *toil*.

Then I considered *all that my hands had done* and the *toil* I had spent in doing it, and again, all was *vanity* and a *chasing after wind*, and there was *nothing to be gained under the sun*.⁴

Even though Qoheleth's search through *wisdom, pleasure, wealth, and work* doesn't lead him to a satisfactory answer to the meaning of life, he is not without some measure of hope, some measure of faith.

...eat your *bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart*... [he says].

Enjoy life with the [spouse] whom you love, all the days of your vain life...because that is your portion in life and in your *toil* at which you *toil* under the sun.⁵

But at the end of the book, Qoheleth turns from a faith that simply *endures* the world to one that comes close to something *deeper*:

The end of the matter [he says];
All has been heard.
Fear God,
And keep [God's] commandments;
For that is the whole duty of everyone.⁶

Ecclesiastes reveals a measure of faith that has taken root in an otherwise skeptical, secular person. His faith seems to be moving from one which *survives* to one which *conquers*. Like many of us, he is somewhere in between, but he is yearning for that faith which *conquers* the world rather than merely *survives* it. "Remember your creator in the days of your youth." "Remember."⁷

⁴ Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:11.

⁵ Ecclesiastes 9:7-10.

⁶ Ecclesiastes 12:13-14.

⁷ Ecclesiastes 12:1.

III.

What is a faith that *conquers* the world?

I have gone a long way to set this question up and only left a few minutes in which to answer it. Perhaps that's a bit intentional, but the only way I know how to offer an answer is to speak from my experience.

In New Member Classes, I usually introduce my faith story by saying that I had a healthy upbringing with school, sports, and the Presbyterian Church forming the three pillars of my life.

And I have been blessed to live a fortunate – perhaps even charmed – life.

- I have never been in physical danger or physical pain.
- I have not, like some of you, been injured in combat, shot out of helicopters, crawled on my stomach to avoid gunfire or overhead aircraft.
- I have never been forced to wear a yellow star.
- I've never faced the loss of a child.
- I have never been the object of a slur (at least within my hearing); and when I have been stopped by police officers for a traffic violation, my initial reaction has been not one of fear, but frustration at myself and irritation that my insurance rates will go up once again.
- I have never been threatened with cancer or addiction, mental illness, or life-threatening surgery, though close family members above, below, and even beside me have sought to survive these, and not all have been successful.

But I've *seen* a lot, *been near* a lot, *heard* a lot from people sharing with me something they have never shared with anyone else, a privilege in and of itself.

- I have known mistreatment myself, in matters of the family, in matters of the heart, in matters religious.
- I have made my share of mistakes, some harmful to me, some harmful to others.
- I have been given what Isaiah calls "the tongue of a teacher,"⁸ but have sometimes used that tongue to "tear down" rather than to "build up."⁹

Yet for some reason God has given me a life that leads me to wake up every day wanting to live it.

- I see beauty in the complexity of human nature and human challenges, and I am enthralled by such complexity, just as ornithologists are enthralled by the complexity of birds and children by patterns in snowflakes.
- I cannot linger with a book unless it prompts me to copy passages from its prose and poetry on its inside front cover and any other pages with free space available; and I enjoy revisiting these copied passages when an inkling of their memory enters my mind.
- I rarely have trouble going to sleep; I can hardly stay in bed once I'm awake; and I have almost no ability to make myself sleep late.
- For most hours of the day, I have an abiding yet not hovering sense that God is *beside* me, *behind* me, *in front of* me, *above* me, *beneath* me, and at times even *within* me.

⁸ Isaiah 50:4.

⁹ Ecclesiastes 4:3.

- I never really *doubt* God and I don't think that God ever really *doubts* us.

The faith God has given me leads me to want to *share* with the world rather than *dominate* it; to *persuade* others rather than *force* them; to view *expectations* God has articulated for us and *responsibilities* God has given us as *opportunities*, *challenges*, *privileges*, *even honors* to meet and exceed rather than *demands* to be dreaded or feared.

My favorite funeral prayer – by Cardinal Newman – contains the phrase – “until the fever of life is over, and our work is done.”¹⁰ “The fever of life” is a positive phrase for me; it is something my own faith provides for faith conquers the grand and glorious world in front of us, even when its un-grand and inglorious aspects have the upper hand for a time and threaten for a season or more.

For faith conquering the world, and beckoning me to be part of it, I am grateful to God.

IV.

It has been thirteen months since we have broken bread and shared wine together in this sanctuary. And we won't exactly *break* bread *together* today, but we will *partake* of it together; and, as always, it's only grape juice we partake, but we will partake that *together* too.

In one of his brighter moments, Qoheleth writes:

*eat your bread with enjoyment,
and drink your wine with a merry heart.*

The very fact that we are here to eat and drink shows that we have been blessed to survive the most recent threat in the world; even as over three million have not, some of them quite close to some of us, and even as the pandemic devastates India.

But nonetheless we are here, flesh and blood, in a pew, some with family we haven't seen in a long time, side by side, mother to son, mother to daughter, daughter or son to mother. We are here in this sacred space, brushing up against one another, touching one another, if we have deemed one another safe.

*Eat your bread with enjoyment,
and drink your wine with a merry heart.*

At least for now, the faith we have has led us to *conquer the world*.

Amen.

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¹⁰ Available at <https://www.johnhenrynewmancatholiccollege.org.uk/john-henry-newman-prayers/#:~:text=Prayer%20of%20Cardinal%20Newman,and%20our%20work%20is%20done.>