SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

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*“Whom Do You Trust?”*

Some of us may remember the title of today’s sermon as being *close* to the same as the title of a 1950’s game show. I do not know if it was ever shown here in Hawaii because in the 1950s and the early 60s, television was still kind of new here, and everywhere else.

At any rate, there are (arguably) two things for which that program is still remembered. First, it was hosted by a very young Johnny Carson—and this is where he met and became partners with Ed McMahon.

The second thing the show might be remembered for is that it raised the ire of many a high school English grammar teachers across the nation, because the show used the word “who” instead of the more grammatically correct word, “whom.” (Please note that I have a lot of respect and affection for English teachers and have, therefore, made the correction in my sermon title.)

These two things are about all that is remembered about that game show. I remembered it because it occurred to me that the question it posed is a good one—*who or whom do you trust?* The content of that question is an important one for us. It is also important for the people who first heard the passage that was read for us this morning from the first letter of John. Indeed, for them, and us, this *is* an urgent question.

It was urgent then because theirs was a community—a church—in the throes of deep division over their understanding, and their faith, in Jesus Christ. They were deeply disturbed over the truth of who Christ was, and is, *and* who he is and was in their lives.

The church was composed of mostly Jewish people who had accepted Christ as the Messiah. Unfortunately, the reason for these letters is that there was a group within the church that had stopped believing in this and had left the church. What was worse is that the ones who left—who are often called, the deceivers—began harassing those who had continued to believe in Christ.

The writer of this letter is known (from the second and third letters of John) as The Elder. And he is overseeing the faith and progress of a network of house churches near the city of Ephesus (which was in what is now western Turkey).

In this letter, and in the other two after it, The Elder addresses the turmoil brought on by the deceivers. What he wants the church to know is that they are not just followers of Christ. Even though they are a generation removed from the life and ministry of Jesus, they are brought into the same relationship of love and life as the apostles themselves—those eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Throughout this letter, The Elder is especially eager to remind the church that they share the same fellowship with Christ as the apostles. The word we use for this is the Greek word, *koinonia.* While *koinonia* does mean “fellowship,” in the Elder’s context it means so much more. What the Elder wants to convey is the depth and power of God’s love for them.

And so the *koinonia* of Christ, that The Elder wants the church to recognize and embrace, is that they have been brought into an intimacy in their relationship with Christ that is not only deep and true, it is *profoundly* deep and true.

Theirs is a relationship with Christ that has been given to them by the *Word* about Christ that has been shared with them by the apostles and other believers.

If this sounds a little familiar, it is because the language the Elder is speaking to them in very much the same language—using the same words—that we have heard in the Gospel of John. In the gospel, the *Word* is with God before all of life.

Indeed, the *Word* *is* God, and because of this it is more than speech. What the Elder means to convey is the breath of life, the spirit and energy that is the *Word*, and how it has, since before the beginning of all things, has been constantly stirring, accompanying God, and God’s journey with the human community which we can read about all throughout all the Hebrew Bible.

The *Word* that has been proclaimed to them—and to us—comes from the apostles and other believers, but also, from God’s own *Holy Word,* which comes to us from God’s own self—in the way in which God has acted in the life of the world. And especially in the way God is proclaimed in the life of Jesus Christ who came to us to show us God’s love; who lived with us as a fully human and fully divine.

The Elder also wants us to grasp God’s testimony, which was given to us as Jesus hung upon the cross. The testimony was the blood, Christ’s blood. The blood is also God’s testimony to us in that: Christ’s blood was shed so the world would know—forever—that Jesus’ words (in the Gospel of John) were true. They were real and true, that *“no one has greater love than this,* [than] *to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”* [John 15:13]

What the blood of Christ reveals to us is that God will shield us from death with God’s own body—*with God’s own body.* We are brought into this deeply intensely faithful love through baptism where we die to old alliances, and are raised to new life and relationship with Christ.

What is amazing to me is that this testimony is not forced on us. It is really love, and we know this because it is offered to us. God’s love is offered to us, and it waits until we have embraced before it comes into our lives and we realize, too, what it means. In the same way, God’s testimony about Christ is not *imperial—*it, too, is offered. Think of that: God’s own testimony about Christ—which is to say: God’s testimony about life and God’s love for us—is offered to us in the midst of so many other testimonies with which we are surrounded every moment of our lives. God’s testimony does not destroy all others. Rather, it opens a door into life and light and invites us to walk through.

In John the Elder’s day, that multitude of other testimonies were identified as “the deceivers,” whose whole purpose was to lead people away from Christ.

What do we call them today?

I suppose we, too, could call them “deceivers.” But more than label them, what I hope we will do is to recognize that “the deceivers” are only a strong influence in our lives when we are afraid, because that is what fear does. It causes us to focus only on ourselves. Fear causes us to shun anything and everyone who is unlike us, and our preferences.

So, when we are fearful we become unable to *“lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”* When we are in the grip of fear, everything we see becomes a reflection of our own biases and prejudices. Fear expresses itself in habits of anger (often violence), and resentment, and bitterness. It privileges oneself or group over all others and excludes or rejects any challenge to its exclusivity. It that way, it creates a kind of loneliness that separates us from so much that is around us, including love.

Conversely, when we have received the gift of God’s love in our lives, fear is the first thing to go because God’s love breaks down all obstacles and creates fellowship—*koinonia*. God’s love is what clears the way for us to live in the world without being afraid of anything in it. And each and every time we act on God’s love in our lives, we offer our own testimony about God—the power of God’s love, and the love we have been given.

At this point in the sermon, it would be natural for me to offer you a story of an example of someone who has been touched by a love that has torn down old fears, hatreds, and angers. There are many such stories. Instead, I will give you a couple of names for you to Google: Ivan Humble, yes, that is a real name, I v a n Humble, as in to be humble. The second name is Oshea Israel, wonderful names, aren’t they, and real, O s h e a Israel, like the country. These are just two men with stories of love and life.

As for us in this moment, what I would like to ask you to do is to ask yourself: *Whom do you trust?*

What I would like us to do is to really consider that question, go deep with it, and do not accept easy answers, easy answers for ourselves. What I would like us to do is to listen deeply for the way in which God is testifying to us in this very moment about the love and *koinonia* we are offered. I would like us to commit to listening to God’s testimony; commit to being a listening community.

I make all these requests so that we may have what God truly desires for us to have: a love that can strengthen, encourage, and move us into a future filled with hope and promise.

May this be so. Amen.