

**Message Notes:**

**1 John 4:17-20**

And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world.

Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. We love each other because he loved us first.

If someone says, “I love God,” but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?

**I. Introduction to the Epistles**

*A. What is an epistle?*

*B. How was writing and sending a letter more challenging in the 1st century?*

**II. Discovering the Occasions and Context of the Epistles**

*A. Why is it important to know the historical context in applying a letter’s teaching?*

*B. How can we see the letter’s context by reading between the lines?*

*Pastor’s Note: A good study Bible will provide introductory information at the beginning of each book and letter of the New Testament to help you understand the context, and study notes at the bottom of each page to guide you as you read. My favorites: The New Interpreter’s Study Bible, the TNIV Study Bible, and The Life Application Bible (NLT or NIV). Several are available in our bookstore.*

**III. Examples from Several Epistles**

*Write down what you learned from John about several of the epistles and how the message of these epistles might speak to your own life situation:*

**IV. John’s Epistles**

*A. What was happening when John wrote his epistles?*

*B. What does his message mean to us as a church? To you?*

*C. The Message of the Epistles for Mother’s Day...*

### **Meditation Moments:**

*Pastor's note: Please see my "pastor's note" in the sermon notes from yesterday's sermon where I recommend several good study Bibles. Part of the joy of being in a Bible study, like Disciple Bible Study is learning about the historical background of the Bible and then reading the text with greater understanding. This week we'll explore five different letters of the New Testament. Enjoy!*

**Monday, May 10** – Today we'll turn to what has been referred to as "Paul's Masterpiece" – the Letter to the Romans. Paul had not been to Rome when he wrote this letter, but he longed to go there, and he already knew many of the believers including the leaders of the church. Because he had not been there, he wrote his longest letter, laying out the gospel that he preached with more detail than in the letters to the churches he had preached in. He addresses the human condition (caught in sin), and the saving work of Jesus Christ. How we appropriate that salvation (by faith) and how we live in the guiding power of the Spirit. There seem to have been questions about the relationship of Jews and Gentiles, and some may have looked down upon the Jews who were not believers – something Paul corrects. Then Paul devotes four chapters to practical advice on how to live as Christians. *Read Romans 8* where Paul describes the spiritual life of the Christian, the hope we have, and the Spirit's work in our lives. Invite God to speak to you through this passage. Read it slowly and carefully – there is a great deal of "meat" in this passage. Note two passages that speak most clearly to you.

**Tuesday, May 12** – Some of the Corinthian Christians were becoming prideful, believing their spiritual gifts indicated a greater spirituality than others. There were divisions emerging in the church. In addition Corinth was the French Quarter of the Roman Empire, with hundreds of prostitutes who served the temple of Aphrodite by offering their wares in the market place. Sexual immorality was rampant there and there was some degree of confusion around this topic. Some were saying that, because salvation came by faith, not works, "everything was permissible" in terms of actions. *Read I Corinthians 7:12-20*. How is our culture like 1st century Corinth and how do these verses speak to us today? Knowing what you know about the spiritual pride in the church at Corinth, *read I Corinthians 13* – what was Paul saying to the Corinthians? How does this passage speak to you?

**Wednesday, May 13** – As you read today's reading, do a little detective work yourself – based upon what Paul writes, describe the struggles of Christians in Philippi. How are those struggles like our struggles today? *Read Philippians 2:1-24*. Use what you've read in this chapter as a starting point to pray about your own struggle with these things.

**Thursday, May 14** – James, who wrote the NT epistle, was not the brother of John, but the brother of Jesus and the leader of the early church at Jerusalem. He was concerned that some would take Paul's teaching of salvation by grace through faith – not by works – as permission not to pursue a holy life. His epistle is primarily focused on calling people to live a life of holiness in response to the gospel and the gift of salvation. He even cites one of Paul's favorite passages, about Abraham, but uses it to teach the importance of works in living out our salvation. It's words are practical and applicable to all. *Read James 2 and 3:1-12*. Use these as a basis for prayer.

**Friday, May 15** – We learned last weekend that John wrote his epistles, particularly I John, in response to two primary concerns. Some had been teaching that Jesus was a spirit being, but had not really come in the flesh (because one of the philosophies of the day was that flesh was inherently evil and spirit was good). This struck at the heart of the faith, and John had stood at the cross watching Jesus suffer and die. He held strong convictions that Jesus had come, in the flesh. These teachers had been rebuffed, and left the church, taking some of the members with them. There was a resulting animosity that developed towards those who had left. It is also likely that the believers who were left were not always practicing love towards one another. How do you see these themes in the following verses: *Read I John 4*. Pray that God might help you in demonstrating love to his people.

**THEME: Journey through the New Testament**

**“The Epistles”**

*The monologues in this sermon were written by the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection  
May 8-9, 2010 at First United Methodist Church - Durango*

**1 John 4:17-20**

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If someone says, “I love God,” but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?

**[Lights go dark]**

**VIDEO      The Epistles Introduction (Jeff will move into place during video)**

**[Light Button #6]**

**SLIDE      The Epistles**

My name is John, son of Zebedee, brother of James, disciple of Jesus, and now most often called, “the elder.” I have been asked to speak to you about the epistles in your New Testament—to help you understand why we wrote these letters, and what we hope those who read them might receive. We hoped that you also might grow in your faith and might be encouraged in the Way of the Lord by reading our letters.

Let me remind you that for me and my friends these documents and letters were our New Testament. You have heard of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and even my own gospel, John. You know of the Acts of the Apostles and the stories about what happened through the work of the Holy Spirit among the churches throughout the Roman Empire.

As those churches were formed we apostles would preach the Gospel in a town or village and then we would move on to another place and then another. But the believers that we left in those places had no training. They knew very little of what it meant to follow Jesus. We had spent just days or if we were lucky weeks with them before we had to move on. How would they know what believing in Jesus Christ

meant? How would they be able to discern truth from error? How would they grow as followers of Jesus if we did not help them?

So we wrote letters to them. In our letters we would encourage them and correct them. We sought to train them in righteousness that they might continue to grow in grace and serve the Lord.

These letters were written mostly to churches, although on occasion we would write to individuals. I wrote to Gaius. My friend Paul wrote two letters to Timothy and one to Titus, encouraging these young pastors, Timothy at Ephesus and Titus at Crete. He wrote to Philemon and I will tell you more about his story in a moment.

It is important for you to understand that when we wrote these letters it was not done lightly. To write a letter took a great deal of effort and came at a great cost. Just to get the paper for a letter was a challenge.

A small letter like this one could have been produced on papyrus. Papyrus was handmade paper from Egypt. It came from the papyrus stock and was sliced. It was woven together and then to work in a very laborious process. It was the cheapest of papers but unfortunately it did not hold up very well. Still, some of us wrote with papyrus because it was what we could afford and what was available.

We preferred to write with parchment. You might have learned that parchment was made from the skin of animals, primarily goats. One small letter like what you know of as my second letter would have taken a half a goat. Paul's letter to the Romans would have taken 16 goats!

Then there was the problem of finding someone to write for you. I don't think it will come as a surprise to you that I could not write in Greek. Peter could not write in Greek. Peter could scarcely write in Aramaic but we couldn't communicate in the dominant language of the people in the Roman Empire which was Greek. They needed to hear from us in that language. We could speak the language passably but writing it was another story.

So we had to find a scribe in order to write a letter. If a friend was available who could write well then they would do these things for us. If not, we would have to hire a scribe and that is no small expense. It would cost a month's wages to write a medium length letter.

Paul could write in Greek quite well, but because of his eyesight, what you call macular degeneration, he was unable to write in his later years. So he had friends who would write for him, Timothy and Titus and Tertius and others. Peter had Silvanus and others. It was no small task to write a letter.

Then there was the matter of delivery. How does your letter get to those that you wish to write to when they live hundreds of miles away? There was a Postal Service in Rome for official state business only. So if you were to send a letter it had to be delivered by a person going to the place to which you were sending a letter. On occasion you could find someone who was going near that place. They probably would have to travel out of their way however to get the letter exactly to the person to whom it was addressed. Their entire journey might take three months by ship and another month by land before they were able to deliver your letter. Even if they were a friend, and they were going near that place anyway, you felt obligated at the very least to provide for their food and shelter as they were delivering a letter.

You begin to see how complicated it was to write and then send these letters. I consider it nothing short of miraculous that you have 21 of our letters still in existence. We are most grateful, and I am humbled, that you actually take the time to read them.

I have often wondered, “Would the people reading these letters in other places and times understand them? Would they appreciate these letters and the thought that went into them? Would these letters speak to the people who read them?”

I wonder if my letters, and the letters of the apostles, speak to you?

Let me remind you that each of these letters was written in a specific context. They were written primarily to the churches meeting in homes. Usually they were written for specific reasons, answering questions or trying to correct problems in the church. They sometimes offer a word of encouragement.

As we wrote these letters, the context itself became very important in understanding. I wonder, if you were to write a letter and someone else were to read your letter—someone to whom you had not sent it—and you gave very specific advice for one person would that same advice apply to another person in a quite different situation?

For instance, Timothy struggled with pain in his stomach. Paul knew that drinking a little wine would help ease the pain in Timothy’s stomach. But Gaius struggled with drinking. Even one drink was a problem for the man. He could not stop with just one. So Paul’s advice to Timothy could not have been the same advice I would have given to Gaius. Do you see what I mean?

It is important to know the context and understand why these particular words were being written to this particular church. Then you can ask yourself this question: “In what way is my life or my church like this particular church to which Paul, or James or John was writing?”

Then you begin to hear the word that we were offering. Then I hope you will ask, “What does this mean for my life today? Is this word still a relevant word for my life today?”

Let’s see if these words are relevant for you today.

Let’s begin with Paul’s magnificent gospel to the Romans. You might be asking yourself, “I thought it was a letter and not a gospel?”

Of course it was an epistle. But the truth is that it was a different kind of gospel than the ones Matthew, Mark, Luke or I wrote. Paul wrote a lengthy epistle explaining the meaning of Jesus’ suffering and his death. He laid out the reason why we need a Savior.

Paul begins by announcing that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. Then he reminds the readers that everyone struggles with sin. Sometimes we forget this.

In the churches I wrote to some believed that they were without sin. They believed that they had overcome sin and it was not a reality in their lives anymore. I had to write to them and correct them that, ***“If you say you are without sin then you lie. You must be in the darkness and you cannot see because all of us struggle with sin.”***

Paul captured it well in a passage that took a great deal of courage to speak. He said, ***“This is the law that I see at work in me. There are things I know I should do and I cannot find the strength to do them. There are things I know I should not do and I find myself continually doing them. What a wretched man I am! Who can save me from this body of sin and death?”***

When I read those words in Paul’s epistle to the Romans I immediately felt pierced in my heart because they are often true for me. I struggle sometimes. I know what I should do as his follower and yet so many times I fear or dread doing it. There are times I do things and I think, “Why have I done this? I know this hurts someone? I know I should not have said this thing and yet I could not stop myself.”

This is what Paul meant by sin. I wonder, do you struggle with sin? Do you ever say this thing that you don’t want to say and regret it later? Do you ever do this thing you wish you hadn’t done and feel ashamed afterwards? Do you ever find yourself in a place where you know the thing that God wants you to do and yet you don’t have the courage to do it?

If you do, then you can understand Paul’s words. They will still speak to you today.

Instead of simply reminding us that the wages of sin are death, Paul goes on to say that the free gift of God is everlasting life and salvation in Jesus Christ. He came to save sinners. He is our Savior.

So when Paul asks this question, “O wretched man that I am, who can save us from this body of sin and death?” He gives his own answer, “Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ.” In the very next line he says, ***“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for he has set us free from the sinful nature.”***

Paul then tells us about the Holy Spirit working in the lives of the believers. He teaches us about the Christian life and how we are meant to live. We are not meant to be conformed to this world anymore but we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We are to minister to one another and bear one another’s burdens.

He reminds us of something else most profound. He says, ***“I am persuaded that all things placed in the hands of God will work together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purposes.”***

This is a profound thought, and how true it has been for me in my life. Every tragedy in my life, everything I look back upon and I see as heartbreaking at the time—the death of my brother James, the death of Peter and Paul, the persecution in the church—the evil one seemed to have the upper hand and yet in the end, always, God brought forth something good from that tragedy. Death and sin and brokenness and wrongdoing could never have the final word for God made all things work together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purposes.

I wonder if that word still means something to you today. Do you know and understand that even in your life, the suffering and the tragedy and pain inflicted upon you—even that which comes from the evil one—God will wring good from it if only you will place it in his hand? Therefore we have hope.

My, how I love Paul’s letter to the Romans.

I also marvel at his letter to the Philippians. The church at Philippi was a house church. They met in a setting like this around a common table. They would break bread together and worship together. When they did, they found strength and they grew in love. Paul wrote to them because they had sent him sustenance and help through Epaphroditus while Paul was in prison.

But Paul also heard some discouraging words about the church in Philippi. There were two women in the church, his friends and companions Euodia and Syntyche, who had been strong leaders in the church. Now, however, there was conflict. One had done something to hurt the other. Their conflict was spreading throughout the church,

and so Paul writes to them and says, ***“Stop this arguing between yourselves. Reclaim the love that you had for one another.”***

I wonder—do you ever have conflict with others that you truly love? They have hurt you and you feel there is no way to restore that friendship. Paul would say that there is always a way to restoration, if you’re willing. Does this speak to you today?

One of my favorite of Paul’s letters is one you might overlook. It is his small letter to Philemon. Philemon was a believer in the church at Colossae, another small church. Philemon had a slave. You ask, “How could a believer have a slave?”

In our time we could not imagine a world without slaves. I say that to my shame and our shame in our time. People sold others into slavery. Sometimes they sold themselves into slavery to pay off their debts. We could not fathom a world where that was not happening. How grateful I am that you were able to see that in God’s kingdom it is absolutely absurd that one human being would own another, but we did not see it that way.

Philemon owned a young slave whose name was Onesimus. Onesimus was sold into slavery by his parents. His own mother and father sold this boy to be a slave. Can you imagine this? This is the way it worked in our time.

His parents gave him his name as a child. Do you know what Onesimus means, the name his parents gave him? It means, “Useless.” This is what his mother and father called him from birth. I wonder if you could imagine growing up in a home where your parents called you useless and then sold you into slavery. This was Onesimus.

And he ran, and who could blame him. He had the opportunity as a teenage boy and he seized upon it. He ended up in Rome where another man mentored him and took him to visit the apostle Paul in prison. Paul was teaching and saying, ***“We are all slaves to sin, but Jesus Christ has bought us with his own blood. He has redeemed us that we might live in love and walk with God as God’s children. Every one of us is loved by God. There are none who are worthless to God. God love is so deep and wide that we cannot imagine or believe it. Nothing can separate us from that love.”***

Onesimus heard these words and for the first time in his life he believed he was loved, by a God who sent his son to suffer and die for him that he might be free. I wonder—can you imagine the effect the gospel had on this young boy?

Paul mentored him there in the prison. Then Paul sent a letter to Philemon, the young boy’s master. Paul new Philemon because he had won this man to Christ and convinced him to say “yes” to Jesus. Paul could be most persuasive when he wished to be.

Paul said to him, ***“Philemon, he who was useless has now become useful to God and to God’s kingdom. I send Onesimus back to you but I would ask that you receive him not as a slave, but as a dearly loved brother in Christ.”***

In other words, “Set him free.”

Philemon did this. He set him free and Onesimus went on to become, years later, the Bishop of my own hometown, the bishop of Ephesus, before his own martyrdom.

Do you see what God does in the lives of human beings? I wonder if there are any of you here today who felt as if your parents saw you as worthless, useless. Do you know that you have a Father in heaven who loves you, who called you by name, and who longs to make you useful for His Kingdom? If only you would trust in his love you would discover new life.

Do these letters speak to you today?

Corinth was a church which was most confused. There were many problems in Corinth and so Paul had to write to them on more than one occasion. Among the problems in Corinth was sexual immorality. Corinth was situated just between an acropolis. At the top of the acropolis there was a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. She was served by a host of priestesses who would come down from the Temple Mount and would offered their bodies to the men of the town of Corinth for an offering to the goddess Aphrodite.

People in Corinth were very confused about intimacy. Paul had to write numerous lines of text in his epistles to them, to help them understand the sacredness of the gift of sexuality and to instruct them on how to practice this gift, and how to use it appropriately.

This was not the only problem in Corinth. There also was a problem with those who perceived themselves to be more spiritual than others. Corinth had many who were exercising the ecstatic gifts of the Holy Spirit, speaking in the tongues of men and of angels and offering words of prophecy. These people had studied the Hebrew Bible enough to believe that they were quite mature.

They began to look at their own teacher as someone who was somehow not as mature as they were. They began to look to the other apostles, especially Apollos, as one who could offer them “true” wisdom. You see, for Paul was for beginners and Apollos was for the truly mature in their faith.

I wonder if you can hear or imagine the spiritual pride that began to set in at Corinth.

**[Light button #7]**

## The Corinthian Woman monologue

*They are envious.*

*We have been touched by the spirit in a different way than they, and they envy that gift.*

*There is nothing wrong with their gifts of craftsmanship, but they see us singing in the language of angels.*

*Clearly our gifts are not the same.*

*We do... love them and consider them a people of value, but the Lord understands that we are mature in our faith. And we have made good use of this gift.*

*Perhaps, someday, they'll receive it as well.*

*I believe I'll gather the small group of us who have been so gifted. We'll meet in my home, only those of us who have spoken in the tongues of angels.*

*We'll study the teachings of Apollos, whose wisdom and depth offer us much more than the simple teachings of Paul.*

*I wonder...I wonder, if perhaps, we should start a separate church entirely. For those of us who are so deeply understanding this truth.*

*We could be a great encouragement to one another.*

### [Light button #6 – Back to John]

Oh yes, they would be a great encouragement to one another—in their small church of the super mature.

I wonder—would you like to hear what Paul wrote to them to correct what they were experiencing this church? He wrote some powerful words to the men and women like this in the church at Corinth. I have always loved this passage and loved Paul for his profound words. He wrote to those who spoke in the tongues of angels who were so mature and said this:

***“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all of my possessions and I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”***

Then, as if to make sure that they completely understood he said:

***“The love that God looks for is patient and kind. It is not envious or boastful or arrogant, and it is certainly not rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrong doings but rejoices in the truth. Love errors all things, believes all things and it hopes all things. It endures all things and this kind of love never ends.”***

Paul closed this magnificent passage saying, ***“These three things up by: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”***

In all of our churches it was surprising how easily spiritual pride crept in and caused so much hurt. Sometimes it was longtime believers and sometimes it was those who had just said “yes” to Jesus Christ. It was amazing how “these Christians” would look down upon “these Christians.” “These Christians” would speak poorly of “these Christians.”

They all failed to realize that the true sign of spiritual maturity was not a particular perspective on this issue or that issue, but it was the capacity and the willingness to love. That was the sign of spiritual maturity.

I wonder—do you believers ever struggle with this? Do you struggle with loving others? Do you struggle with speaking ill of others? Do you still need to hear the words of our beloved brother Paul? These words were hardly written for the wedding ceremonies at which you usually read them. They were written for daily life and how we interact with one another.

James wrote about this as well. James was writing to correct a problem that was similar to the one in Corinth. This was not James my brother. He had been to death by the sword by the time this epistle was written. This was James the brother of our Lord who was leading our church in Jerusalem.

James wrote his epistle with words of correction and reproof. You see, there were some who were teaching that if you had accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior and he had saved you from sin then nothing mattered in terms of your daily actions as long as you did not hurt anyone. You could gather for worship in someone’s home and you could break bread and you could praise God, and then you could go back out into the world and live like everyone else did in the culture the rest of the days of the week. You could then come back the next week and do it all over again.

There was a complete disconnect between one’s daily life and actions and one’s faith in Christ. Paul of course had taught that we were saved by grace through faith and not by our works so that no one may boast. But how distorted a picture that people might think they could actually be Christians by only attending our services and not actually living the life of Christ during the week?

So James writes these words. He says, ***“Faith without works is dead. You say you have faith and I have works, but I say to you, show me your faith without your works and I by my works will show you my faith.”***

***“You say you have faith—good! The demons have faith and shudder when they think of God. But faith without works is no faith at all.”***

Then he began to point out piece by piece the places in which they struggled in living out their faith. He spoke about the widows and the orphans and he said, ***“True religion that is undefiled before God is to care for the widows and the orphans, not to pass them by.”***

***“If you see a brother or sister who is hungry and you say, ‘Peace to you, be well fed,’ but you don’t give them anything to eat, what good is that! Your good intentions are sending you straight to hell.”***

***“And your tongues—you come and you praise God during worship and then you walk out and you speak ill of your neighbor and your friend with those same lips. You curse your brother who you can see and you praise God who you can’t see. Brothers and sisters, out of the same spring cannot come saltwater and freshwater. This should not be so!”***

Then he chastised the church because there were some in the church to which he was writing who were wealthy and well known. There were others who were poor. When they gathered together for worship the well known and the famous were given the best seats in the poor were asked to sit on the floor. When it came time to distribute the bread for the Eucharist and to share in the love feast, there were only crumbs left for the poor while those in the better seats had the greatest amount to eat. The well fed became even more well fed and filled.

James said to them, ***“This cannot be what you really believe Jesus wants, for in him the first is last in the last is first—and the greatest among you will be known because they are servants. This is what life in the kingdom looks like.”***

I would ask you—do any of these words mean anything to you today? Or are these words only for the people of our time?

I understand that today you celebrate important women in your lives—mothers and grandmothers, wives, aunts and women who have mentored you in your life. This is a good thing.

Our people struggled with family relationships, and our world was very confused about how to treat women. Some of you read the writings of my brother Paul and you wonder why he said the things he did, especially related to women. You live in a much

more progressive time and you see things differently today, but I tell you that we in the church were quite progressive for our time.

There was a letter I once read, and you can still read this letter today, that was written by a merchant. He wrote to his wife in our hometown. He was away on business and she was about to deliver her child. He wrote to her apologizing for not being there with her when she gave birth. Then he gave her these instructions.

After telling of his love for her he said, **“My dear, I just want to remind you that if the child is a girl you are to discard her. If the child is a boy you are to keep him. Farewell.”**

This happened often in our time. The girl children were left on the trash heaps. We believers would come and take these orphaned children and raise them in our families and in our churches. This was the value of women among many in our society. And when women were grown you were not to speak to them in public or to count them as worth anything.

So when Paul teaches that in Christ there is neither male nor female he offers something revolutionary. When we told the stories of Jesus’ love for women in the Gospels and how he interacted with them we were telling you something revolutionary. When Paul teaches that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave his life for her, he was teaching something revolutionary.

Of course, we taught in all of our churches the great Commandments, including the one that says we are to honor our fathers AND our mothers. To honor means to revere. It means to bless. It means to encourage and to care for. When we are young it means not to hurt them and when we are mature and grown it means to find ways to minister to them. This is what we taught. I suspect this is a word that you still need to hear today.

Finally, let me talk about my letters for a moment. There are three of them as I hope you know. The last is a very short letter written to Gaius. It is a thank you and a word of encouragement because he had welcomed and shown hospitality to strangers who had come to his church. It was also a warning about one man in his church in particular who manifested spiritual pride and needed to be put in his place.

The second of my letters was written to the chosen lady, and I hope you know who I was writing to—the chosen lady is of course the church, the body of Christ and the bride of our Lord. Her children are you, the believers.

In my longest epistle, the first one, which is two goats long, I wrote to correct a false teaching in the Church. Many had come to faith in Jesus and they had brought with them their beliefs from their culture. They would meld together those beliefs with

the Christian faith. It made sense to them if they could bring these two worldviews together.

In this particular case there were those who had always believed that the flesh was evil and the spirit was good. The journey of the soul was to be set free from the body so it could make its journey to the heavens where all was perfect. They had seen Jesus as the one who had delivered us from this body of flesh and death into the eternal realm. They received him as the Logos, the Word of God, and they believed in him.

But, they did not believe he had come in the flesh, because flesh was evil. A spirit being like Jesus could not have come in the flesh and put on evil and so they taught that Jesus came and only appeared to be mortal, but he was not truly flesh and blood.

But I was with him! I touched him. I stood by and watched him bleed, and I watched him die. He was flesh and blood, and he was divine.

The believers in this church knew this already and they had a concern for truth. Those who had been teaching this philosophy had already left and formed their own church, but something dangerous happened to our church. In their love for truth, in their desire for purity of doctrine, they had forgotten the most important commandment which was not only to love God with the mind and the heart and hands, but to love the neighbor.

So I spoke these words to them in the tradition of Paul and James and Peter and all the rest. I wrote to them the words that you read earlier:

***“Beloved, it’s good that you have a longing for truth, but in the midst of this do not forget that we are called to love one another.”***

***“For love is of God and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God, and those who do not love do not know God. For God is love.”***

***“How can you say that you love God when you don’t love your neighbor who is in your midst? How can you love a God who is invisible, and whose very nature is love, if you cannot love your neighbor who has flesh and bones and is standing next to you?”***

Part of what I knew is that often, the people whom God has entrusted to our care, those who are closest to us, sometimes we treat the poorest. It is easy for us to love someone for five minutes after Fellowship and church because then they leave. But the husband or the wife that we live with, how easy it is to take a tone of voice that is hurtful and how easy it is to treat them disrespectfully. How easy it is for us to

treat our parents in a certain way or treat other family members in our midst with disdain.

So I reminded them that you cannot say you love God if you are unwilling to love your neighbor or your family member who you can see and feel and touch.

I ask you: Are living a life of love? Are you striving to do this? Do you recognize the places that you have hurt others? Do you seek to make amends? Are you growing in this love?

I don't know if these old letters still speak to you today or not. But I pray that you might listen to their words. I pray that you might ask God to reveal to you how these words might speak to your life today.

In my day we used to greet one another with a holy kiss. I will not ask you to do that today. I understand that makes you uncomfortable. But I wonder, in lieu of a holy kiss, would you be willing to simply take the hand of the person next to you right now? You may not know their name and I understand this might feel unusual for you to actually touch another human being, but would you simply take their hands? If you are by sitting by yourself would you be willing to slide over and touch the hand of the person next to you?

This person even may not know. They may be a complete stranger to you, but they are your neighbor and you are called to love them. This person whose hand you are holding maybe your spouse and you may have struggled with loving them this very week. You may have said things which were hurtful or done things for which you need to be reconciled.

The person whose hand you are holding maybe your mother or your father. It may be that this day you need to reaffirm your love for that person. I remind you today that we are called to love.

So I would invite you to do this as you hold that person's hand today. I would ask you to bow your heads with me and silently take a moment to pray these words, in your own words.

**SLIDE      Prayer**

*Lord, help me to love. Help me to love the people who sit around me. Help me to love the people I come into contact with every day—not merely a love that is words or even emotions, but a love that shines forth in my deeds. Forgive me for the hurtful things I have said and done. Help me to love. In your name we pray. Amen.*