

Reading the Council's Mail
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
May 9, 2021-AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
3 John

Linda and I sometimes use old postcards for decorations. We have a few that date back from the 1910's and they have pictures on them from the area around Sodus Bay, New York, where Linda's family used to have a cottage, so they're a nice reminder of an old family place. Linda bought them for the pictures on the front, but we both love the messages on the back.

One of my favorites is addressed to Mrs. Minnie Lent, Palmyra New York, and it says,
*"Dear Minnie and Winnifred,
Having a dandy time. How is Minnie feeling? Better I hope.
Having fine weather. We expect Papa this boat.
Just above the X is our cottage and this is the place we bathe.
Lots of love, from Dorothy and Maude.*

It's just enough to be sort of interesting. There's just enough there to give you the sense of a story. There's just enough there to make you wonder what's really going on. What's Minnie sick with? Will papa's boat arrive on time? There's the thread of a story there, but you can't be completely sure about what's really going on in the life of Winnifred, Minnie, Dorothy and Maude.

That's a little like what we have with 3 John. This is a short personal letter, barely longer than a postcard. And when we read it we have enough to get a sense about what's going on in the lives of Demetrius, Gaius, Diotrephes, and the elder, but not enough to be completely sure.

Here's the story as best we can piece it together. Somewhere in Asia Minor there is a young church. It was planted years ago by one of the apostles. It's been around for a few years now. Long enough that it's not just a messy church plant anymore; it's established. It has worship patterns, it has leaders, and who knows maybe it even has committees.

Gaius is a member and a leader in this little church, and it sounds like he's generous with both his time and his money. When Christian visitors from other towns come to visit, he puts them up in his home and shows them hospitality. It's his way of giving to missions. Gaius is also the recipient of this letter, it's addressed to him.

The Elder is the author of the letter. Tradition says that he's the apostle John, though it doesn't actually say that in the letter itself. Elder John is not a member of Gaius' church. He's a member of an older, larger church, probably in a bigger town. Elder John sent the letter because he wants to give advice and check up on how Gaius' church is doing. That's why this letter is carried by a person. This person wants to give greetings to Gaius' church and see how things are going in the ministry.

Demetrius is probably of the person carrying the letter. He's the designated church visitor. He's coming so that he can give personal greetings on the elder's behalf, and so that he can bring the elder a face to face report on the health of the little church. Demetrius hopes to stay at Gaius'

house, but Gaius has never met Demetrius. In the letter Elder John puts in a good word: “Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone! He’s a great guy!”

Reading between the lines, we can tell that this is not the first time the elder has sent a letter. John had previously sent a letter to another member of the church, someone named Diotrephes. That letter was probably also carried by a messenger who was hoping to bring greetings and check up on how things were going. But Diotrephes rebuffed that visitor.

“No you may not stay at my house. No I’m not interested in your letter. Why don’t you just go on back to John and tell him to mind his own business. We don’t need his advice. We don’t need him sticking his nose in our affairs. We are doing fine all by ourselves!”

Not only does he refuse to receive the first messenger; he threatens anyone who might be tempted to put them up. He threatens to boot them out of the church.

Summing up, it seems that what we have here is a good old-fashioned church power struggle. Church politics, 1st century style. Reading 3 John is not like reading 1 Corinthians 13, or Philippians 4 or Ephesians 1, words of deep theology and soaring rhetoric; it’s more like reading a sharply worded email to council. But the Spirit has given us this letter and listening to these words this week and meditating on them I would like to share three things I hear the Spirit saying to the churches.

First, the Spirit is saying something about how churches relate to each other. 3 John was written late in the first century. At that point there were young churches spread out all over the place. There were churches in Asia Minor and Palestine and Syria and Greece and even in Rome. As these churches matured they developed their own community habits and community traditions, a new question arose. How would these churches relate to one another? You have a church in Lystra and a church in Pergamum and a church in Antioch and a church in Smyrna. Would they all work closely together? Or would they all stay independent? Would there be oversight and accountability? Or, guided by the Spirit, would every church make their own choices? Diotrephes and the elder have different answers to this question. Diotrephes is all about local control. He doesn’t want those bigwigs from Ephesus coming round to check on his church. They should mind their own business. Elder John wants mutual accountability and oversight. He wants Demetrius to give a report on the health of the church.

This tension still exists in the modern church. People still disagree about the degree to which a local congregation like LaGrave should be free to make its own choices, and the degree to which it should be accountable. Currently, the trend is all towards independence. Denominations are getting weaker. Denominations like the Christian Reformed Church or the Presbyterian Church or the Catholic Church are accountability structures. They are losing members and they are losing influence over their member churches. Individual churches are holding back money and resources for their own stuff, giving less to the denomination. On the other hand, the churches that are multiplying are independent, non-denominational churches. These churches don’t answer to outsiders, they don’t send money to a classis or a denomination, their leaders don’t have to deal with denominational oversight. In North America the trend is all towards independence.

Diotrephes would love that trend. He likes to be in charge. He doesn't like oversight. These trends would suit him fine. If Diotrephes were working today he'd be a megachurch pastor and he'd have his own 501c3. Diotrephes Ministries International.

The modern religious trends might be towards independence, but we must recognize that the letter of 3 John and the New testament in general pushes the other way. When the Holy Spirit gave us 3 John, he gave a letter that urges us to be accountable to other churches and to religious authority. "I have no greater joy than to know that my children are walking in the truth" says Elder John. Listen to what's behind that statement: He's calling them his children. That suggests both authority and supervision. The elder is reminding Gaius and all the members of that congregation that he has authority over them and that it's perfectly appropriate, even necessary, for him to check on them, for him to make sure that they are walking together in the truth. This whole letter is an exercise in mutual oversight and mutual submission. This whole letter testifies that churches are not independent operators.

And it's not just 3 John which pushes in the direction of connection, it's the whole New Testament. Every New Testament letter points to mutual accountability and connection rather than independence. Every New Testament letter was written because a church leader was encouraging another congregation and holding them accountable. In every New Testament letter, the Spirit is saying, it is not good for churches to go it alone.

My wife Linda grew up at Rochester CRC, which was a solid, traditional CRC. They sang from the Psalter. They used the forms. But in the summer she would go to Camp of the Woods which was a more evangelical camp in the Adirondacks. There she met all these expressive Christians who just shared their faith and she sat under the preaching of preachers who had altar calls. It opened up new dimensions of faith. But it also made her more committed to her own tradition. She had friends say to her, 'Y'all are a Calvinist right? Y'all believe people are chosen from eternity for salvation right?' Yes, said Linda. 'Why do you even bother with evangelism then?' It forced her to think more deeply about what she believed. Her encounter with this other group both deepened her walk with Jesus and it made her more appreciative of her own tradition. Sometimes we churchgoers talk as if the trend towards free market and congregational independence is a good thing. That's not what the Spirit is saying to the churches in 3 John. That's not what the Spirit is saying to the churches in the rest of the New Testament.

If we listen closely to 3 John we also hear the Spirit say something to the churches about the importance of face to face faith. Did you notice verse 13?

"I have so much more to write you, but I don't want to do it with pen and ink, I hope to see you soon and we will talk face to face."

Did you notice that this is pretty much exactly what John says in 2 John as well?

"I have more to say, but I don't want to write. I want to see you face to face."

I wonder, if John were writing today whether he might say, *"I have so much to say to you but I don't want to say it on Zoom anymore, I want to talk with you face to face."*

I am so grateful for our livestream, and I am so grateful for the virtual tools that have helped us to connect during this pandemic. Livestream has been an enormous blessing. Zoom has got us through meetings, zoom has allowed us to keep in touch with distant loved ones. I am grateful

for these tools and we will continue to lean on them for a little while. *But the gold standard for Christian community is face to face.*

That's not just something suggested in the closing greeting, it's represented in the whole purpose of the letter. What does John want? John wants Gaius to give hospitality to Demetrius, to let this brother into his home, to establish a relationship between the two of them. John wants a face to face hospitality. John wants a face to face connection between the churches. It's interesting, John suggests Diotrephes is not walking in the truth, but there's nothing in this letter that suggests Diotrephes has bad theology. We don't hear about any bad doctrine. Why then is Diotrephes not walking in the truth? Because he is not practicing hospitality. Because he is not practicing the habits of community. Walking in the truth is not just having the right opinions; walking in the truth is to be in Christ and his community.

There is something unique that happens in face-to-face community. Being with real people brings 2 things: blessing and grit. You come into the Narthex after church and you see Mary across the room - you haven't talked to her in ages. You go over and talk and she tells you she had her first grandchild during the pandemic. She's vaccinated now and a week ago she finally was able to go and hold the baby. *"You know when I was holding her, I just had an overwhelming sense of God's faithfulness and presence!"* As she tells you this you can see she's tearing up and you can feel the weight of her joy. Her testimony blesses you. It fills you. That's the *blessing* of face to face. Another day you see Bob and you know that his wife was diagnosed with cancer. You haven't talked to Bob yet, and you feel bad about that, but seeing his face prompts you. So you go over to him and say, "Hey, how's your wife." Bob starts to talk, and he talks some more, and pretty soon it's clear that he needs some time. So you sit down at a table outside and by the time the conversation is over you're the last ones out of church. That's the *grit* of community.

We need zoom and livestream right now, it's a blessing. And many of you out there have no choice. Livestream is your only option. But it will never be a substitute for the grit, the work, the blessing of face to face community. *"I have so much to say to you but I don't want to say it to you with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon and we will talk face to face."*

There is one more thing I hear the spirit saying to the churches in this letter. I said earlier that reading 3 John is less like reading an inspirational psalm, and more like reading a sharply worded council email. There is comfort in that, though. In a weird way, it's comforting to know that just 50 years after Jesus resurrection churches were already fighting and sending each other cranky letters. In a weird way, it's comforting to know that only 50 years after Jesus there were difficult people like Diotrephes in the church.

Why is that comforting? Because it tells us that these shenanigans have always been with us, and more than that, it tells us that human misbehavior can never bring down Christ's church. That's because humans aren't the power behind all this, the Holy Spirit is the power behind all this. Human mischief can't stop the gospel. Diotrephes' power grab couldn't stop the gospel. The empire's persecution couldn't stop the gospel. The barbarian invasions couldn't stop the gospel. The ridiculous bloodshed of the crusades couldn't stop the gospel. The medieval popes who sometimes behaved more like frat boys than religious leaders, they couldn't stop the gospel.

The slaughter of the religious wars of Europe couldn't stop the gospel. Stalin couldn't stop the gospel in Russia. Mao couldn't stop it in China. The rise of the Nones and the rising secularism of modern America will not stop the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. The power of our hope is not carried by the strength of our hands or the clarity of our minds or the firmness of our wills. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus and his righteousness. We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

There's a lot of catastrophic rhetoric about the future of the church these days. Everything is falling apart! It's never been this bad! There's a lot of outrage and panic. While we must always be vigilant, and while we must always be on our guard against the devil's schemes, 3 John reminds us that the road of faith has always been full of fightings and fears. But the fears and the fightings do not hold the road, Jesus holds the road. He will bring us all the way down the road and we will see him face to face.