

Children of God

I carried the article from the *Tallahassee Democrat* around for months. I clipped it out at breakfast one morning and stuck it in my wallet because it upset me so much and bewildered me even more. I pulled it out every couple of weeks or so to read it over. I suppose I hoped that what's written there might have changed, but of course, it hadn't. I thought that if I pondered and prayed over it, I'd gain some kind of empathy or insight to help me understand.

The headline reads "Ex-pharmacist gets maximum 30 years for diluting cancer drugs." The pharmacist's name is Robert R. Courtney and this is his crime: He watered down prescriptions for Taxol, Gemzar and other chemotherapies, charged patients for the full cost of the drugs, and pocketed the difference. Prosecutors figure he cheated something like 4,200 patients, altering 98,000 prescriptions.

It was a very lucrative scam. Mr. Courtney pocketed as much as \$780 on a single dose. Nobody knows for sure how much he squirreled away. Nobody knows how many days or even years on earth his victims might have gained had they received the medication their doctors prescribed. The court ordered Mr. Courtney to cough up 10.4 million dollars in restitution to his victims -- a large sum of money but a small consolation.

His motive, Mr. Courtney told the court, was greed, but there were mitigating circumstances. He was under pressure to pay a \$600,000 tax bill and there was something else that he felt obliged to do. He wanted to honor the pledge he'd made to give one million dollars to his church.

It was that last bit of information, which appears in the final sentence of the article, that caused me to clip it out and put in my wallet. *A million dollar pledge to his church.* This criminal, this amoral felon, this monster with no conscience, turns out to be a Christian, my brother in Christ. He met his pledge by stealing time from the lives of cancer patients.

Mr. Courtney's, or should I say "brother Robert's" case is, I must admit, severe -- a bit over the top -- but it raises an inescapable question: Why aren't we Christians better than we are? How could a Christian do such a thing? After carrying the article around for months, I stuck it in a file folder. It was today's Epistle reading that prompted me to pull it out again.

The letters we call First, Second, and Third John are a preacher's gold mine, a mother lode of quotable quotes. From them we get phrases like "**See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.**" (I John 3:1). I've used those words to conclude almost every baptism celebrated in this sanctuary.

Or how about this: **“God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all”** (I John 1:5). Those are encouraging words to those of us who are all too aware of the darkness, the darkness that leads us into sin and threatens to engulf us.

The “letters” of John may not be letters at all, but sermons preached and later written down for circulation. Most scholars think they were composed by an unknown church leader and circulated amongst a group of Christians who had been traumatized, both by their conflict with the surrounding culture and by division within the church.

The people addressed in these letters seem to have caught grief from at least three directions. Ostracized by fellow Jews, they had also been harassed by Gentiles, and to add insult to injury, they had been scorned and rejected by fellow Christians, both Jew and Gentile. These sermons or letters seek to assure the members of these small, relatively isolated communities that despite all appearances to the contrary, they are the beloved children of God.

The author suggests that their mistreatment at the hands of Jews and Gentiles alike, and even at the hands of people who consider themselves Christian, is evidence that these small communities of believers indeed are God’s children. Just like Jesus, the Son of God, they are despised and rejected, and just like him, they are beloved of God. In time, the world will recognize these faithful believers as God’s own children, simply by observing God’s love at work within them.

God loved us first, the writer insists, and therefore we should love one another. **“Beloved,”** the writer entreats, **“let us love one another, because love is from God”** (I John 4:7).

That’s all very well, but what about the Robert Courtneys within the church? What about Christians who do terrible things, who rob and murder and dilute life-prolonging medicines to get money to pay their pledge to their church? What about Christians who praise the current Reprobate-in-Chief, that lover of “two Corinthians” who lies with abandon, cheats on his wife, and panders to racists?

In Johannine terms, what about Christians who *love one another*, but don’t seem to love anyone else?

The writer of these epistles seems to contradict himself on this matter. On the one hand, he seems to say that all Christians are sinful. Sin is an inescapable dimension of fallen humanity. On the other hand, he seems to say that *real* Christians don’t sin at all. If church members do sin, it must be that they weren’t true Christians in the first place.

In the opening verses of I John we read, **“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us”** (I John 1:8). The gospel requires us to confront the

darkness within, and to bring our sins to light. In that light there is hope, for “. . . **if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.**” (1:10).

That seems pretty clear. Christians do sin, and because of God in Christ, have hope of forgiveness. How, then, can the same writer say a few verses later, **“Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin because they have been born of God”** (3:9)?

Yes, Christians sin. No, Christians can’t sin because they are God’s children. Can *you* hold these two ideas together? I can’t.

The writer of I John is trying to straddle two worlds – the world as it is and world as it is coming to be. On the one hand, he wants to assure his flock that their suffering is not in vain, that God has claimed them and will not let them go, that God’s perfect love revealed in Jesus Christ has in some sense already made them perfect. On the other hand, he warns that the most dangerous Christians of all are those who say they have no sin. They deceive themselves. The truth isn’t in them.

How does a man go to worship every week, give generously to his church, and pay his pledge by cheating cancer patients out of their medicine?

I suppose he does it by building a wall of separation between his faith inside the church and his actions outside. “Compartmentalization,” I believe it’s called, the same process used by Nazis who tortured Jews by day and went home to bounce their children on their knees by night.

My guess is, brother Robert didn’t build that compartmental wall all at once. He built it little by little, brick by brick. For all I know, members of his own church helped him build it by praising him for his generosity and honoring him for being such a fine Christian. *“You see that man over there with the hymnbook in his hand? He’s a Christian pharmacist. He pledged a million dollars to the church and he’s keeping his promise. What a sterling example to the world.”*

Brother Robert’s wall became remarkably tall and thick, hellish in its dimensions, but in principle it is no different from the walls you and I build, the walls between what we profess and how we live.

The culture we live in has taught us to think of faith as a private affair, insulated from what we like to call the “real world.” That’s a lie, of course, wholly out of sync with the Christian gospel, which proclaims that God loved the world, both private and public, enough

to become incarnate within it. “*Faith is a private matter.*” That’s a lie -- a lie so common to our culture that most Christians accept it as a given.

The culture calls us to compartmentalize. The gospel calls us to integrate. The culture says “Keep faith and morality separate.” The gospel says the risen Christ is the Lord of all of life. If brother Robert did build a wall around his faith, I suspect he had plenty of help – not only from cultured despisers of the faith, but also from professed despisers of the culture who are so bewitched by it that they are oblivious to their own enchantment.

On the one hand, the writer of I John calls the church to step away from the culture – to be a people set apart, the children of God, chosen, precious, perfect in love for one another. On the other hand, he calls the church to face up to our own imperfection – to our colossal self-righteousness, our monumental myopia, our lack of love for those outside the cozy confines of ecclesiastical familiarity.

A friend of mine, who listens carefully to sermons, asked me what this week’s sermon would be about. “About the relationship of faith to ethics,” I replied. “Oh great,” he said. “You’re going to make everybody feel guilty.”

(I hate it when people critique the sermon before I even get to preach it.)

My friend is right, of course. The gospel isn’t about our being good, despite the efforts of preachers to make it so. It’s not even about God’s being good. It’s about God’s love made flesh in Jesus, love that claims us knowing we will never be good enough to deserve him.

That kind of love doesn’t require us to be good, but it does put us on the road to loving God back. Once on that road, it walks along with us until our hearts burn within us and our eyes are opened. We *can* become better people than we are, not just because we *ought* to be better, but because God wants us to be better, and, being loved by God, we want what God wants.

I think I’ll put this article back in my wallet to remind me to pray for brother Robert, a fellow sinner. Perhaps from his prison cell, he is praying for us. Whatever the case, we have in common this one thing: the love of God which makes us God’s own children. And that is what we are.