

The Greater Joy • 3 John 1-4

When you came in to church you should have received an envelope with a piece of stationery inside about the size that you need for a small letter. Do not write on it because I'm going to ask you to write something on it later.

But let me tell you about a very small letter that is, in fact, the smallest of the New Testament books. It is the New Testament letter of III John. It is the shortest, at least in the original Greek text in which it was written. It was written by the Apostle John, the one described earlier in the New Testament as the very special friend of Jesus Christ, one who knew Christians and knew the Christian church very well.

He had seen it at its worst. He had seen one of his own colleagues, Judas, betray Jesus. He had been the only one of the disciples who had been an eyewitness to the crucifixion. For while all the others were in hiding, it was John and John alone, of those 12, who went to Calvary and actually saw the horrible price for human sin that Jesus paid.

It was John who wrote the letters of I John and II John that repeatedly talk about sin and its problems in the Christian life and community. It was John who later, after he finished this little letter, wrote another one of the major books of the New Testament, the book of The Revelation. Revelation is an apocalyptic picture of the consequences of sin and the terrible things that are related to us.

But the last of his little letters is addressed to a man and is written with very great joy. In fact, in some ways, it is one of the most joyful books in all the New Testament.

It was written to a man named Gaius. While that may not be a very common name in our society, some people think it was the most common name that was used in all the Roman Empire. It was as frequent then in the first century as the name John is for us today.

We don't know a great deal about this man named Gaius, other than what is here written, but we do know that he must have been a great guy, a fantastic friend, a wonderful person. He encouraged John's heart. Gaius was a grand example to John, and I think to us as well, of what Christianity is all about. So John wrote to him a letter, small enough to fit on one side of one piece of their papyrus in the first century, telling about his great joy for this friend named Gaius.

Let's take a look at what it says and learn some things in terms of the description that's given of this man. III John, verses 1 through 4, starts out,

The elder,

To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.

Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

John starts out by using a typical style. In fact, in doing some research, I read some of the letters that were written in the first century by sailors who wrote to the family back home, and much of the form is almost identical to that which John used. So what's significant here is not the form, but the meaning that goes with it.

He writes that this person, Gaius, is his dear friend. That immediately makes me recall that John was himself a dear friend to Jesus, Jesus' best friend. That is something I don't pretend to fully comprehend. But John was the one who was identified as different from all the rest of the disciples in his special closeness to Jesus Christ. What an extraordinary description, the one who Jesus especially loved, the one Jesus committed his mother to at the time of his death.

I conclude that John had learned what friendship is all about from Jesus, that Jesus had been for him the very best of friends. You would almost think that John would never need another friend again, that a friendship with Jesus Christ would be good enough to last for a lifetime. In fact, it would seem to be a great let down to ever have another friend after Jesus. At 90 or 100 years old, wouldn't you think that John would feel self-sufficient and fulfilled in the relationship that once he had had, and in a sense still

had, with Jesus Christ?

Except, everyone needs friends, including John. And maybe his experience with Jesus whetted his appetite all the more so

that he had to continue to have those kinds of relationships. He needed someone with whom he could share his problems and someone with whom he could share his joy, someone with whom he could share all of life. And Gaius was the kind of person that could be that kind of a special friend. He was, as John described him, "my dear friend."

Friendship, of course, has got to have some com-

I have discovered a number of times that letters that I thought were quite clear on one day could be quite easily misunderstood when reread on another day.

mon basis. I once read in a Readers Digest article about this pair of individuals who were involved in a mountain climbing accident. They were virtual strangers at the time it took place, but the article ends by saying that they now have an extraordinarily close relationship because of what they had experienced together.

For other people it's a common hobby or a common background or a common language. It can be almost anything, but there has to be some kind of common ground for a solid friendship to take place.

John says that the common ground for the friendship that he had with Gaius was truth. They shared together the truth of the Christian message, the truth of a relationship with Jesus Christ and the truth that is taught within the Bible. In other words, they believed the same thing, and that's why John could write to his dear friend, "I love (you) in the truth."

More is explained about their relationship in verse 2. Here seems to indicate that Gaius had questionable health. Now I'm doing something here that is admittedly dangerous, and that is I'm filling in some blanks. A letter written 2,000 years ago that was probably easily and readily understood by both the writer and the recipient can sometimes be difficult to understand by those who read it at a different time and different place. But I conclude, by what is here written, that Gaius was in poor health. And the reason I say that is that John writes, "I pray that you may enjoy good health." The fact that he's praying that he'll have good health seems to indicate that probably he had some type of a health problem.

I'm not sure what significance to attach to that, except to say that Gaius was had his problems like everyone else. If that line weren't there, we might think, with all the accolades John gives to Gaius, that he was the perfect Christian without a single problem. But when there is this hint of sickness, of vulnerability, we discover that Gaius, the man about whom we know comparatively little, had problems just like we do. Struggles were part of his life, just like they are part of our lives.

I confess to you that I find a certain satisfaction in that - not a joy that the man had problems, but a satisfaction in knowing that someone who is lifted up as this tremendous Christian had difficulties just like the rest of us. I get a measure of encouragement from that. You see, if someone has everything in life going extraordinarily well and there is not a single problem in that person's life, I wonder if that person really understands the reality of life or could possibly identify with your journey or with mine.

I take encouragement to find someone who struggles with ill health or has problems with emotions or finance or job or family or marriage or some other area of life, yet still is faithful to Jesus Christ. When someone still demonstrates Christian virtue, even under difficulty and stress, that gives me hope

in my difficulties and in my problems and in my stress.

There is an extra joy in that the problems were shared between these two friends. That helps to explain why John writes, "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you."

But while he may have had questionable health, he also had what John calls a successful soul. It seems a strange way to describe it, a successful soul. Gaius may have been sick, but his soul did well. John says that he prays that Gaius will do as well physically as spiritually, "even as your soul is getting along well."

What is a soul that gets along well? How do you describe that? If we are made up of two parts, the spiritual and the physical, we can easily judge whether the physical part is in good health or poor health. But how do we judge whether the spiritual part is healthy or sick? Is it not healthy when one knows the power and the presence of Jesus Christ? Wouldn't that be a mark of a healthy soul? Is it not the inner life of a man or a woman that is filled with the Spirit of God and controlled by him?

Let me tell you what I think is a common dilemma. We all look at other people and try to mold and shape our lives by the way other people look and by what other people say and do. When someone is a teenager, we call that peer pressure, but we kid ourselves if we think that it is limited to teenagers. Even the youngest children look around to see what everyone else is like so they can mimic their behavior. And the oldest of adults is also aware of the influence of other people. That means that much of our Christian lives are influenced by others around us, by their Christianity, by what they say and do and what they like and dislike. The question is, if we are serious about being Christians, what kind of models do we want?

I think that we've had a significant switch in our society in that area because 20 or 30 years ago what Christians looked for were perfect models. We wanted models who never sinned, who were powerful in prayer, who were experienced in Christian faith. We wanted models who seemed to have all the answers to all the questions and were comparatively problem free. The Christian community was often tempted to idealize those who seemed to be perfect already and to elevate them up to a stature that was totally unrealistic.

We would compare ourselves to them and say, "I fall terribly far short because I'm not as perfect as he or she is." Then, when those models would begin to crack in their perfection, when some sin - small or great - became evident, there was a tendency to push that person off the pedestal and try to find someone else to put in that individual's place. That became very discouraging because we knew that we could ever measure up to the perfection that we attributed

to other people.

In more recent days, there has been a switch from perfect models to imperfect models. Today, to the other extreme, we have broken models who have sinned and perhaps sinned greatly, who have suffered enormously. Books that are written, movies that are made, stories that are told and sermons that are preached are often about those who have great problems, who struggle with the worst of difficulties in life. And we compare ourselves to these broken models and say, "At least I don't have those problems," or we say, "At least there are other people who have the difficulties that I have or who are worse off than I am."

The good part of the broken model is that we realize that we're not alone. We don't look so bad when compared to others. But the very bad part of continually elevating the broken models is that we begin to wonder if the transforming power of Jesus Christ is real. We look at other people say, "If they continue to struggle with sin, if that person who knows the Bible so well falls so steeply, if life for others is constantly in the pits, then does this gospel work? Is the power of Jesus Christ real? Does the Holy Spirit really make a difference in life? And if not, then why be a Christian at all? Where is the hope if it doesn't work?"

There is actually something wrong with both of these models, whether it's the perfect model or the broken model. And that's what I like especially about Gaius, for he is a biblical model who demonstrates, in a sense, both. Did he have problems? Yes, he clearly did. He had physical problems not here detailed, but it seems they were great enough that they needed to be mentioned. But he also knew the transforming power of Jesus Christ - absolutely. We are told that his soul was getting along well.

That's the kind of model I need. I need the biblical model that says that here is someone who struggles with life and has problems and sins just as I do, but someone whose soul does well. I need to know that the power of Jesus Christ is real enough to make a transforming difference because that gives me hope that I can experience that transforming difference as well. I find here in Gaius the biblical model of both, a man who had his problems, but a man whose soul did well.

There is another description of him in verses 3 and 4. We are told that John has an added joy that comes from the good reputation of Gaius. Every pastor knows the mixed emotions of having a complete stranger walk up and say, "I know someone from your church." You are never quite sure what you're going

to hear next. You're not quite sure whether you'll hear something very positive or very negative. It can be the story of someone who has enormously benefited someone else, or it can be the story of someone who has enormously cheated someone. The reputation of the church hangs on the reputation of the people from that church.

But far more important than that, the reputation of God hangs on the reputations of Christians, and Gaius was someone who had a great reputation. John never needed to be embarrassed when someone would come up to him and say, "I know

one of your friends, a man named Gaius."

John writes, "It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth."

John was probably older than Gaius. By the time he was writing this he was somewhere between 90 and 100 years old; he was probably older than just about everybody! So he must have been older than Gaius as well. He tended to think of him as a son, as a child. So when people would come up to him and say, "Gaius, yes, he is the one who is faithful, faithful enough to walk in the truth," then John could say, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

Every Sunday I get to meet visitors to Wooddale Church. When I meet these people, I have a list of questions that I routinely ask. One of the questions is, "How did you hear about Wooddale Church?" Some people say they don't remember. I used to think that was an insult, but then I decided to give a positive twist to it and I concluded that they heard about Wooddale so many times in so many positive ways that it's all just become a blur. Therefore, they don't remember how they heard about Wooddale Church. And that's good.

Some people say, "I drove by and saw the building and wondered what it was and decided to come and check it out." That's good, too, because we want the building, like everything else, to be attractive and to draw people.

But by far, the most frequent answer I get when I ask that question is the name of somebody that comes to Wooddale Church. Maybe it's a relative or a neighbor or a coworker, and what is absolutely delightful about that is that the person who is a visitor has looked at the life of that person and said, "I'd like to go to that kind of person's church." That is a wonderful compliment to all the names that I hear rattled off by our visitors Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. It's fantastic. It is a taste of John's joy that

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he had in the marvelous reputation of Gaius.

John tells us that Gaius specifically had a good reputation because of truth and walk. Truth refers to what Gaius believed, and walk refers to what Gaius did. So this marvelous man not only believed the right stuff, but he lived it every day in the relationships that he had. It's no wonder that John found great delight in this man who actually lived out his Christianity.

I read this tiny book of the Bible and it brings back to my mind the names and the faces, some quite distant, and some quite near, of those who have played the role of Gaius in my life. I think of Gaius and, even though he's been gone for almost 2,000 years, I like him. I understand when John says that he loves him because I love him, too. I'm especially grateful for those who have been Gaius in my life because, like John, I have been blessed. My life has been touched and my life has been changed by friendships with men and women who also share the common denominator of the truth, men and women who were not perfect, who had their problems and their struggles. When you become a good friend of someone, you know those problems and struggles that they face. But there are men and women who have lived out Jesus Christ anyway, maybe because of the problems and struggles they have had, in whom I have seen the transforming power of Jesus Christ. These are people who have good reputations for their faithfulness, their faithfulness in the truth that they believe and the walk that they have. They are people that have molded and have shaped me.

I think of a few years ago, being back in the church in which I grew up in New Jersey, and having contact with a man that I had not seen for many years, probably for decades. We had a brief conversation in the hallway and that was about all there was to it. He reminded me that he had been my Sunday school teacher when I was in the fourth grade. And he said to me, "Leith, I want you to know that when you were in my Sunday school class, I prayed for you every day. And I want you to know that I have prayed for you every day since then."

That man has prayed for me, by name, for almost my entire life. I could write a letter about that. I could write and tell him the difference that he has made in my life. He has been to me as Gaius was to Paul. And I am grateful.

But switch with me, for a final moment, from Gaius to John. John was an old man. I suspect that he was a busy man. What if he had never written this letter? What if he had said, "I've got this idea for a new book; I'm going to call it Revelation. I've got to get busy writing it because if I leave that out people will not understand the New Testament. I've got to get on to this next project."

What if he had skipped writing III John? What if he had never communicated this? What if Gaius had

never known the tremendously positive impact that he had on the apostle's life? I think that John did a wonderful thing with a single sheet of paper. He affirmed and he encouraged Gaius and he blessed all of us, as well, by giving us the shortest little book in all the New Testament.

All of that makes me wonder how many other Gaiuses there have been who have shaped lives: Sunday school teachers or parents or neighbors or friends. Those who have made a great impact on lots of apostles and Christians down through the centuries, but who never knew it because no word was ever spoken, because no letter was ever written.

You may have already guessed that this is precisely why you were given an envelope and a piece of stationery that simply says, "Note to a dear friend." What I would like to invite you to do is think for a moment about who could be called that Gaius person in your life. Who has really modeled for you, in a biblical sense, what it means to be a Christian with a good reputation? Who has impacted your life? I'd like to encourage you to write an epistle to that person. It may only be a few sentences long. Maybe it can easily fit on a single side of a sheet of paper. But take that piece of paper and write that note to that person.

Perhaps you will have to scrounge to find the address because maybe it's someone out of a much earlier chapter of life. Find out where that person is and write that person's name and address on the front of that envelope. Mail it, and do what John did for Gaius and for us.

Father, thank you for those people whom you have given to us who have shaped our lives, who really made a great contribution. Bring to mind that person right now, someone for each one of us. Perhaps we've never told them what they have meant to us. May we give to them the same kind of delight that John gave Gaius centuries ago by writing a short little letter on a single side of a single sheet of paper and telling them what great joy they have given us as they have shaped our lives. Bring those people to mind. Encourage us as we write a note of appreciation to them. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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