

**Love and Light:
The First Letter of John**

1 John 5:1-6

A sermon preached by
Rev. RoyBeth Kelley
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
May 9, 2021

5 Everyone who **believes** that Jesus is the Christ has been born from God. Whoever **loves** someone who is a parent loves the child born to the parent. **2** This is how we know that we love the children of God: when we love God and **keep God's commandments.** **3** This is the love of God: we keep God's commandments. God's commandments are not difficult, **4** because everyone who is born from God defeats the world. And this is the **victory that has defeated the world: our faith.** **5** Who defeats the world? Isn't it the one who believes that Jesus is God's Son?

Testimony about Jesus

6 This is the one who came by water and blood: Jesus Christ. Not by water only but by water and blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.

Love and Light: Born For Victory

Today's topic is victory. As an old high school cheer went -- v-i-c-t-o-r-y, that's our mascot's battle cry. There is nothing we Americans seem to love better than a great victory. In fact, when it comes to sports victories, it seems that **some** people are born for victory. Doesn't it seem that no matter what obstacles certain athletes have faced, they were destined for victory! There are so many fantastic stories.

For example, Wilt Chamberlain had many great achievements during his basketball career. But on March 2, 1962, he scored 100 points in a single NBA game, a record some believe will never be broken.

I think of the "Miracle on Ice" when the U.S. hockey team beat the heavily favored team from the USSR in the 1980 Olympics by scoring twice in the final frame to win the gold medal.

I think of Michael Phelps winning eight gold medals in the 2008 summer games in Beijing to become the greatest swimmer in the history of the sport.

I think of Kerri Strug, the American gymnast, who severely injured her ankle after her first vault. But instead of letting her team down, Strug chose to take her second vault and nailed the landing on just **one foot**, securing the gold medal victory for the 1996 women's gymnastics team.

Some athletes were not only born for victory, but they were born to change the world and combat evil and injustice in the world through their victories.

I think of Jessie Owens who captured four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. He competed despite overwhelming obstacles to his even participating as an African American in the midst of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. You see Jessie Owens wasn't just competing for glory for himself, he had set out to disprove Hitler's theory of Aryan supremacy.¹

I think of Jackie Robinson being called up to play his first game in the major leagues in 1947 as a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers. In the process, he broke the unspoken color barrier that had previously existed in baseball, as he was the first African American to ever play in the majors.

But I have to think that behind these fantastic sports victories -- behind the 100 point game and the 8 gold medals and being the first African American to play in the major leagues, there had to have been struggles, trials, hard work, rejection, blood, sweat and tears, and injuries. There must have been a lot of missed baskets and strike outs and falls onto the ice and onto the floor of the gym. The road to victory surely always contains defeat and failure along the way.

So before we talk about the **good** news of victory that waits for us, today I want to ask you to take this scripture personally. I want to ask you to think about the road leading

¹ See

https://www.vardbarker.com/general_sports/articles/the_greatest_moments_in_womens_sports_history/s1_29450957#slide_1 and <https://www.sportsretriever.com/stories/21-greatest-moments-sports-history/>

up to the victory. Would you consider for just a moment what is defeating you right now? What are you struggling with?

Friends, we have come through 14 months of what feels like a string of defeats and hardships. And even though our lives are becoming more ordinary, and we are feeling hopeful about the future, the world continues to be a difficult place. Even faithful followers of Jesus experience illness, pain, grief, anxiety, fear, depression, addiction, sorrow and broken relationships. We fall headlong into sin, and we make stupid mistakes. We are faced daily with evil, injustice and oppression.

Struggles are part of life. Great athletes face trials, we ordinary humans face trials today, and from our reading from 1 John, we learn that the people who followed Jesus way back in the First Century faced trials that interfered with their faithful living.

You see, this letter of First John was written in a very particular context -- at a time when it looked as if the early followers of Jesus were going to be defeated, instead of winning a victory for Christ. There were a lot of obstacles in the path of the early church; they were in crisis, and they sure weren't playing well together as a team, as one body. This letter was written to a group of people who were divided. They were in conflict and facing schism.

Apparently, there were false teachers in the community who were denying that Jesus was the Messiah--they were denying that Jesus came in the flesh. You see, in our theology which has developed over the millenia, we confess the belief in the two natures of Christ. We believe that Jesus was mysteriously at once fully human and fully God! These false teachers believed that Jesus was God, **but** they did **not** believe in the human nature of Christ.

The First Century believers were not sure what the truth about Jesus was. They weren't sure who to believe. And you can imagine the turmoil and doubt they might have been experiencing -- because they had given themselves to this new way of life as followers of Christ. And now they were questioning what they had originally believed! What we see in

1 John, and especially in chapter 5, is a reminder about the basics of their faith---a summary. John talks about the way of life that leads to victory and not defeat. And you will see that there are steps we can take along the way that will make our ultimate victory possible. First John gives us a kind of game plan for living a life of victorious faith.

As with any victory, a game plan is the first thing we need. We need to figure out our ultimate intention and make a plan for getting there. I am certain that the US Hockey Team and Michael Phelps and the US Women's Gymnastics team all had game plans for victory.

And 1 John's game plan is really pretty simple. It boils down to three things. And Bud noticed this elsewhere in 1 John a couple of weeks ago. First John says, **the key to victory is faith**. The key to victory is to believe in Jesus Christ. The next step is to love and the third step is to obey God's commandments. These three ideas are throughout today's text. The game plan is to believe, to love, and to obey. Now as the wife of a former coach and the mom of a football coach, I am used to seeing pieces of paper all over the house with little x's and o's and arrows and lines and game plans drawn up! And maybe it's strange, but the logo of this church's discipleship plan kind of reminds me of the x's and o's of football plays. And if you don't have one, you may want to get your hands on one of these magnets or the faith journal with all the details of the game plan.

But here's the deal: our game plan is only a worthless piece of paper or an ignored refrigerator magnet unless we practice it and put it into action. And so, the second thing is that we have to **practice!** So here's how it works for our faith. You see the three circles of the logo are intertwined - they are connected. As 1st John tells us when you believe in Jesus, then you love God. And when you love God, then you begin to love your neighbor, and this results in obedience to God. And in my experience practice is the key. It does all intertwine! When we have a mustard seed amount of faith, that leads to love and obedience. And the more we practice love in action, the more we practice obeying God, our faith in Christ and love for God

is built up. The more we practice, the better we are at living our lives with Christ at the center of it all. The goal is that living in and through Christ will become our ordinary routine -- and part of who we are! But it takes practice!

The third thing that is required of us if we want to experience victory is to **persevere**. We **are** going to experience things in this world that threaten to defeat us. It is not easy to live in a world that is not fully filled with the love of God. You see the kingdom of God has not come to earth quite yet. So, know that there will be obstacles to our game plan of believing and loving and obeying. There will be times in our lives when we feel absolutely and totally defeated. But I plead with you in those times to double down and focus on the game plan when times are tough. We can continue to run the race and fight the good fight as scripture encourages us to do. I pray we will persevere and continue to believe, love and obey even when it feels impossibly tough to do so.

We need a game plan (which is to believe, love and obey). Then we must practice and persevere.

But, now, I need to go back. Because there is one part of this game plan that is key, and I need to spend some more time talking about this. There is one part of the game plan that everything hinges on. And that is our faith in Jesus Christ - the "believe" part of our mission. You see, our love and obedience springs out of our faith. The writer of 1 John really focuses on faith in today's text as a way to remind the early believers about the core nature of who Jesus was in order to build up their faith.

So, let's look back. Verse 4 and 5 say:

This is the victory that has defeated the world: our faith. Who defeats the world? Isn't it the one who believes that Jesus is God's Son?

It is our faith that brings victory and defeats the trials of the world.

Part of our faith is Christ is believing in the incarnation -- that Jesus came in the flesh. It is stunning to think that God

the Creator of all things would love us so much that he would send his son to earth. To experience everything that we experience. To experience all the defeats that we do. To struggle the way we do. To face trials, hard work, rejection, blood, sweat and tears. Philippians describes the two natures of Christ like this:

Though he was in the form of God,
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.
But he emptied himself
by taking the form of a slave
and by becoming like human beings.
When he found himself in the form of a human,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

The writer of First John goes on to give a testimony about Jesus; he talks about water and the blood. In verse 6 the author writes:

This is the one who came by water and blood: Jesus Christ. Not by water only but by water and blood. (1 John 5:6)

Some commentators believe that in these verses the water refers to Jesus's baptism by water and the blood refers to the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. Others think the water and the blood are both references to Jesus's death. John 19:34 says that when Jesus died on the cross "one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out."

Either way, the point is clear. John is clarifying to the church who Jesus is. He is saying that Jesus was not only God, but he was fully human. He was a flesh and blood human as well as the Son of God. He is emphasizing that the human presence of Jesus on earth is supremely important. One

commentator wrote that “what John is saying is that the Cross is an essential part of the meaning of Jesus and that God was in the death of Jesus every bit as much as he was in the life.”²

And while the life and the death of Jesus are essential, the resurrection of Jesus is the victory! The good news of victory in Christ is not that we will live a life free from suffering or that we can avoid pain and death. Our victory in Christ occurs when we allow Christ to work in and through us even when we are suffering. The resurrection of Christ makes it clear that “**God’s love brings life even out of brokenness and even out of death.**”³

You know most of us were **not** born to win gold medals or to score 100 points in a game. But the good news of God’s amazing grace is that every single one of you **were born** for an even greater victory! This victory is a victory over the ongoing large and small defeats of daily life, but it is also the ultimate victory -- a heavenly victory over the power of sin and death in our lives. In 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul says it like this:

O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.

(1 Corinthians 15:55-57)

We can believe this is so because God sent his son to earth to live our lives, to die our deaths, and to speak directly to you the promise of your **own** forgiveness and your **own** resurrection!

No matter what obstacles you face, you ---are ----destined for victory.

You were born for victory!

V-i-c-t-o-r-y!

² William Barclay, *Daily Bible Study Series*, 1 John, 109.

³ Judith Jones, www.workingpreacher.com, (May 3, 2015).

Thank God!

He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us respond to the greatest offer of victory by professing our faith.

The Apostle's Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic* church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.