

“Passing the Love Test”
1 John 4:1-4, 7-12, 13-18
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Have you ever claimed that you were not afraid - - even though you were?

I'm guessing it's happened to some of us after a horror movie.

We say the movie didn't scare us.

Because we want to appear brave - - or because it's just a movie after all.

On the other hand maybe sometimes we want to be scared by a movie.

A scary movie is a lot better than a REAL scare!

Think of some of the greats:

Psycho, Alien, The Shining, Halloween, The Birds, Jaws...

No one would want to live through any of that!

But lots of people are entertained by it.

I think part of the reason why - - is - - that FEAR and LIES go together pretty well.

We lie about our fears.

Sometimes we lie because of fear.

And sometimes fear keeps us from doing what we know is right and true.

In the 4th chapter of the letter of 1 John, LIES and FEAR are set next to one another.

This Biblical letter is mostly about love.

We have been reading through the letter for the past few weeks.

As we have seen this letter about love - - can also be a study in opposites.

In the first chapter of first John it says that God is light, so don't walk in the darkness.

Then it says that the opposite of love is hate in chapter 2. / And in chapter 4 in the reading for today - - it says that fear and love don't go together.

Love and fear don't go together - - but LIES and fear - - do.

And because there are lies out there...

And because there is fear out there...

And because there are people stumbling around in the dark out there...

And because there is hatred out there...

Because of these opposites - - we need to TEST things out.

The fourth chapter of 1 John begins with the advice to "test the spirits".

Test the spirits to see if they are false.

Test the spirits to see if they are of God - - and not the opposite.

The way John puts it - - the reason to test the spirits is because NOT EVERY SPIRIT - - is a good spirit. / "Not Every Spirit" is also that name of a book of theology by Christopher Morse. / The book is a study in things that Christians are called to DIS-believe.

There are lots of books about what Christians are called to believe.

This is the opposite.

As Christopher Morse puts it: "To believe in God is not to believe everything."

There are some things that Christian faith refuses to believe.

Things such as:

That evil has equal status with good.

That any situation is hopeless.

That what distinguishes church members is they are more loved by God.

That the resistance to grace is never its cessation.

That ultimate reality is not life giving.

Morse wrote the book because of a suspicion that some doctrines are ways to hide things.

Quoting Leo Tolstoy he points out:

“I have no doubt that there is truth in doctrine; but there can also be no doubt that it harbors a lie; and I must find the truth, and the lie, so I can tell them apart”.

So to believe IN God - - is at the same time to DISBELIEVE that which is NOT of God.

Two examples he gives or when the church did that are:

During World War 2 when the Barmen Declaration rejected false doctrines that supported Nazism. / And in the 1980s when Reformed Christians in South Africa rejected the theological justifications for apartheid.

This second example gave rise to a theological confession of faith.

The document was called the Belhar Confession.

Five years ago the Presbyterian Church in the USA adopted that document.

I was in attendance at the 222nd General Assembly when it met in Portland in 2016. As a delegate to that meeting I had the honor to vote for the adoption of this document into our book of Confessions. / It is one example of how we can respond to this call from 1 John.

In his book, Morse points to 1 John chapter 4 as the inspiration for its title.

“Not Every Spirit” is a reference to the first verse of chapter 4.

In his chapter on “Testing the Spirits Today” he writes:

“The freedom to differ requires NOT that one forego the exercise of judgment, but exactly the opposite. / What must be safeguarded is the right to the exercise of judgment on the part of all effected.”

In reference to verse 2 of chapter 4 - - which refers to Jesus in the flesh he writes:

“What does it mean to confess that Jesus Christ has come ‘in the flesh’?”

It means that Jesus is...”involved in the flesh and blood sufferings of every present time.”

It is amazing to me that this book was written in 1994.

That's because these ideas seem so important to me at the present time.

What does it mean for us to TEST THE SPIRITS today?

Partly it means that we have to examine whether any given action can be described as walking in the love light of God. / Do our actions represent what it means to "abide in love".

This Biblical letter about love is not just descriptive OF love.

It encourages us to live our lives as an act of love.

And - - it is a TEST as to what we really mean by love.

What would the "love test" reveal about us?

Love - - for John - - is being willing to say no to lust and pride and evil.

These are what John describes as the "things of this world".

Love - - for John - - is being willing to lay one's life down for others.

A pretty tall order.

And it turns out there are things that pass for love - - that are not really.

So - - test the spirits!

Don't be afraid!

I think that's one of the reasons that this is so challenging. / The reason is fear. / It can be scary to stand up to what's not right. / Fear can stop us from acting on love.

I'm pretty sure that the people who wrote the Belhar Confession had moments of fear.

But I'm pretty sure that the victims of apartheid are glad they did not give in to fear.

Don't be afraid!

Jesus says it over and over...

Don't be afraid!

And even though Jesus says it over and over - - the very last thing the women at the tomb after the resurrection do in Mark's gospel is to be afraid. / It's how the gospel ENDS! / Some scholars think the last word of the original gospel was "afraid".

And yet - - even though they were afraid - - they TOLD someone.

Because here we are!

Don't be afraid!

OR if you have to be afraid - - do the right thing - - and love anyway - - and do it scared.

1 John says that perfect love casts out fear.

So fear and love are opposites.

1 John also says that God is love.

So then - - fear and God - - are opposite too.

None if this means that we won't be afraid!

We'll be afraid all the time.

It's part of human experience.

It's why John writes about it and Jesus talks about it so much.

But remember what 1 John said:

Perfect love - - casts out fear.

Perfect love.

The love of God.

AND - - the love of God - - can be perfected - - in us!

That's what 1 John says.

The love test is not about trying to measure up to God's love.

The love test is COMPARING our actions TO that perfect love.

The love test is not designed to JUDGE US and our ability to love.

The love test is a LIGHT in the darkness to help us find our way.

If we use the love test - - we will find our way to the REAL love of God.

If we use the love test - - we will avoid those false loves that hurt and cause fear.

If we use the love test it will GUIDE us.

When we find how deep and persistent God's love for us - - is...

...then, 1 John says, we'll find our confidence.

So have you ever claimed you were not afraid - - even though you were?

Maybe that's not such a bad thing.