**“Coming, Going, and Walking in Truth”**

**3 John 1:1-8**

**Sermon for May 22, 2016 ~ First Baptist Church of Pottstown**

**by Rebecca Sommons**

How many of us take the time to write letters to our friends and loved ones? There are so many other options today that it is more likely that we would send and receive a text or e-mail than to get an actual, hand-written letter in the mail. Yet, sometimes if we want to communicate something important, we may choose to send a card and write out the message by hand. That way the person can save it to read again even years later.

Our text for today is actually an ancient letter that was handwritten and saved so it could be read later. Most of the New Testament is made up of letters written to churches or individual Christians in the century after Jesus ascended to heaven. People helped each other to know how to follow the way of life Jesus taught and encouraged each other to stay true to it, even when it was hard. The churches shared the letters and passed them onto new generations of Christians, until they made it all the way to us more than 1,900 years later.

The letter called 3 John was written by someone who refers to himself as “the elder.” He might have been named John, but he was at least connected to the community of Christ-followers that was associated with Christ’s disciple – John. The elder was a person who had been following Christ for a long time.

He wrote the letter to a person named Gaius, someone he loved as a dear friend. Verse one says that the elder loves Gaius “in the truth.” I believe that he loved him because they both loved Jesus Christ, who said, *“I am the and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me”* (John 14:6). The elder and Gaius were both followers of Jesus, and this made them family, even if they were far from each other and not part of the same church.

We hear a lot about FBC being “Family by Choice.” It’s true that we are a church family, but just being here together in this building is not what makes us family. Each person who comes to God by believing and following Jesus is part of the family of God. FBC is a small part of the worldwide family held together by God’s love. People from every nation, speaking lots of different languages, making all kinds of music to worship God are connected, because they are brothers and sisters in Christ. When FBC fully includes people from diverse backgrounds, it is a picture of the big Church family.

In the next line of the letter, the elder tells Gaius what he hopes and prays for him. He wants Gaius to enjoy good health, a life where things are going well, and a soul that is growing on his journey. This sounds like something I might write in a birthday card for someone I love. I would want them to know I care about their whole self – body and soul. I care more about how they are growing to know and love God than how successful they might be by the world’s standards. When we really love someone, we won’t just write nice words in a card for them, we will also take the time to pray for them. Prayer can connect us across great distances, because God is present everywhere.

After the greeting and prayer, the elder lets Gaius know what has brought him so much joy. Some other believers had been passing through Gaius’ town and they met Gaius and got to know him. When these same believers came to visit the elder, they told him all about how Gaius was living out his faith. They said that he was “*walking in truth*.” In other words, his life was centered around Jesus Christ, and all that he did flowed out of his love for God, just like Jesus taught his followers.

The elder said, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (verse 4). He considered Gaius to be his child in the family of God, probably because he had taught him about faith in Jesus. Now, hearing that Gaius was living a godly life, his heart is full of happiness. It is better than receiving an expensive gift, better than hearing Gaius had become rich and famous, and better than hearing that Gaius had nice things to say about him. What really brought him joy was just to know that Gaius remembered the truth he had shared with him and was living it out.

Having had the chance to teach God’s truth to many of the children here at FBC, I agree with the elder. There is nothing that would bring me more joy than to hear that they remember and live in the truth of Jesus. Truth is what life is all about. It keeps us from chasing after all the other distractions that promise to make us happy, but leave us emptier than when we started. God designed us, so God knows the way to real and lasting joy. If we keep our focus on Jesus, and no matter what else happens, we will have the best possible life.

Walking in truth is not just believing the right things about God and life; it is active. Gaius lived out his faith by opening his home and his heart to strangers. This is what the Bible calls “hospitality.” Hospitality literally means, “loving a stranger.”

Is this what our culture tells us to do with strangers - to love them? I think the message we hear today is to “beware of strangers.” We don’t want children to trust strangers or talk to them, for fear that they could be snatched or hurt. This may be an important thing for them to learn for their safety, but the cultural distrust of strangers has some unfortunate effects. Even after people grow up, they often keep their hearts closed to people they think of as strangers.

I live in Lansdale in a brand new development of townhouses and duplexes. As the houses were completed and people moved in, I baked cookies and brought them to our new neighbors. I gave them a welcome card with our names and phone number inside, so they could get a hold of us if they needed anything. It has been three years now and only one of our neighbors ever called us or gave us their names and phone numbers. Maybe they were protecting themselves from strangers, or maybe they did not feel like they needed any new friends. Either way, we missed out on getting to know each other.

I’m happy to say that my experience here at FBC has been different from my neighborhood. Even though I was a sister from a far-away congregation, you welcomed me into your own church family. You knew from the beginning that I would only be here for a short time, but many of you still took the time to talk with me and get to know me. We have learned from each other and shared the blessing of friendship.

It takes courage to open our hearts to a stranger. We may need to give them some room or share something we would rather keep for ourselves. Whenever we love someone, we risk the hurt that comes when they leave. But people who are open to real relationships - however brief the time together is – are the ones who know the joy is worth the sadness in parting.

 The elder wrote to Gaius about the parting that would happen, when the strangers who had become friends needed to move on “*for the sake of the Name*” (verse 7). He said, “*Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God*” (verse 6).

Gaius had already met many of their needs. I’m certain that they had shared meals together, because it was part of hospitality and also a practice of Christians to break bread together. I have enjoyed the times of fellowship we have had together in the past year: Advent dinner, Christmas cookies, Easter brunch, Sunday School muffins, even movie night popcorn. Families and friends eat together. It shows love and hospitality, and this letter tells us it pleases God too. Jesus often ate with shared meals with people as a way to show acceptance and to get to know one another better.

Gaius and the other believers in the church also provided money for the visitors and for their ministry. I wanted to let you know that this is the very first paid ministry job I have ever had, and I thank you for providing for me. It has blessed my family and me, and I have also had chances to bless others through your provision as well. When I share what you have given me, whether it is money or knowledge or experience, we are acting as partners. We work together for the truth, just like Gaius and the believers who visited him.

You all have a share in the ministry I will have with the people in Manchester Center, Vermont. You also have my love and prayers, even when following God causes us to be far apart. Maybe we will have the opportunity to visit together or meet other brothers and sisters in the big family of God who will share good news. I would also be happy to hear how you are doing if you would like to write me a letter, and I will write back to you too. Like the elder, I would love to hear that the children, and all my brothers and sisters of FBC, are growing and walking in the truth.