"What's Real (or a Poor Imitation)?"

I John 3:11-18/John 15:12-17/Genesis 4:1-10

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

My youngest grandson Peter has never met a piece of candy he doesn't like. Chocolate or fruit flavored, hard or soft, bite size or in a bar, it's all good for him. At 9 years old he's "well versed" about the world of candy.

About a week ago Peter stayed with Laura and me for 4 days. So we had lots of time to talk. And with his interest in candy I figured he had some solid trick or treat plans. I asked him about Halloween. He told me where in Ellwood City he was going to go, who he was going to go with, and the bag he was going to put the candy in.

He then told me about his costume. He said it included a scary ghost mask, a black hooded robe and black gloves and shoes so in the dark all people could see is the white mask. He then told me that the scary ghost mask came with a bag of red liquid goo and a tube that went from the bag to the mask, so that when you squeezed the bag the red liquid goo came out the corner of the eyes of the ghost mask. Needless to say, Peter was pleased with this special effect.

So I said, "Blood coming out of the eyes; that's sort of scary." Peter said, "Yea, I like it. But you know, grandpa, it's not real." I said, "Well I'm glad about that. But it's still a little gross." He said, "That's why it's great!" It's the world of a 9-year-old boy.

What's real? Somethings are easier to figure out. A costume on a 9-year-old boy is just a costume. But when my phone rings and I don't know the number, is it real or is it a scam? And if a possible employer offers rapid advancement in the company, is it real or just "an empty promise"? And that car you've had your eye on, is the price really that good, or is it covering up a problem? And that new song you like so much, is it written and sung by a real human being, or is it AI generated? I don't know about you, but I don't want to go through life just being cynical. But I do find myself wondering more and more about what's real, and what's a good or bad imitation trying to fool me.

What's real? What about religion? Or more specifically, what's real about Christian faith? That's the driving question in our reading from I John 3. But first, a little background.

II. Brief Exegesis

The text in I John 3 cites the story in Genesis 4, Cain and Abel. The boys are brothers. Cain is a farmer, and Abel a shepherd. The story may have origins in explaining the ancient conflict between farmers and shepherds. But in Genesis 4 it's about something else. It's about human nature and community.

In the story, Cain and Abel make offerings to God. Cain offers from the field. And Abel offers from his flock. And Abel's offering is acceptable to God. But Cain's offering is not. We're not told why. It's a mystery. But we are told about the reaction of Cain. He's jealous and angry. And so he is free to make a choice. He can either fall to sin that is lurking at the door of his life like a lion. Or he can choose the way of peace and defeat that lion. But Cain falls and Abel is murdered.

It is a story about human nature and human community that is repeated endless times. Living in the Garden of Eden is long gone. And what makes it even more tragic is that the boys were brothers. So not only is a life taken, but a family is broken, the human family. Cain has acted as if he were God, taking a life, and the result is tragic.

I John 3 is also connected to the Gospel reading from John 15. In it Jesus gives his "love command." His followers are not known for how much they know, or for the blessings in their lives, or for their power and influence in the world, or for their Christian jewelry and bumper stickers, or for the number of Bibles they have on a bookshelf, or for where they go to church. Rather Jesus' disciples are known for their love for each other. Just as God loves the Son, so Jesus loves his disciples. And that love is demonstrated in his death on the cross. This is not some type of sentimental movie or pop love song. This love is "agape" in Greek; the costly giving of the self for the benefit of the other. And as his followers demonstrate this same type of "agape" love for each other, so they share in this love and are "friends" of Jesus.

The Gospel of John is clear; "agape" love for each other is the bottom line for Christians. Everything else comes and goes. But love is the real "litmus test" of Christian faith and Christian community. Without "agape" love, it is not Christian. It's a poor imitation. Period.

And interestingly, in the theological history of the Church, this is one of the basic understandings of the cross. In the 12th C, theologian and philosopher Peter Abelard spoke of the cross as "moral influence." In the cross we clearly see the love of Jesus and that sacrificial love moves us to faith and to express that type of love ourselves. God is love. Jesus shows us the nature of that love in the cross. And that "morally influences" us to believe and love as Jesus. As Abelard wrote in the 12th C, the Church was at the peak of its power in the world. And that power was filled with corruption, the Crusades, and the Spanish Inquisition. The truth of the cross as "moral influence" was lost. The measure of Christian truth is not power, but "agape" love. It's important to remember that.

With the story of Cain and Abel and Jesus' love command, as background, we come to I John 3. There's a type of "either/or dualism" in this text. There's no gray area, no real complexities of life, no real "a little of this and a little of that." I John is written to be understood clearly. Either the Christian community shares "agape love" with each other, or they don't. Either they are different than the world, or the same as the world. Either they follow the way of Jesus that they heard about from the very beginning of their faith, or they follow the way of Cain. There's no in-between. It's either/or.

The way of love echoes Jesus' words from our text in John 15: "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you." And it's given its clearest expression in Jesus' death on the cross for his friends. That is the commandment and model for Christian community. It's giving of the self for the other.

The other way is the way of Cain. In jealousy and anger, he murdered his brother. It's a way of selfishness, anger, and violence. And it is not only murder, but would also include lies, corruption, injustice, selfishness, and retaliation. It destroys relationships and breaks up community. And in the end, it destroys the lives of those who follow the way of Cain.

And what I John is especially interested in is the life together of the church community. In Luke 10 we get the command of "Loving our neighbors as we love ourselves." And in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, we see that "neighbors" are those we meet in need both inside and outside the church. And I John would be fine with that. But what I John really wants to do is "shine a spotlight on" the nature of the church community. The way of the world so often around us is "the way of Cain." But the church is to be different. It is to be "the way of agape love." It takes courage to live that way. And faith. And hope. But it is the way of Jesus. And it is the real measure of a real Christian community. Anything else is just an imitation.

III. Brief Theological Reflection

We get a feel for the importance of the truth in the Bible in our St. Andrew's service today. As the Bible is brought in by the beadle, it is protected by a knight with a sword. And then there's the clear charge from the beadle to "hear it and preach it." Right interpretation of God's Word in scripture matters. And it mattered deeply to our Scottish Presbyterian ancestors.

In my seminary education many years ago I was taught the same thing. Presbyterian pastors are trained to use Hebrew and Greek, biblical exegesis, church history, and Reformed theology in interpreting scripture. And so you translate the text, or at least take a look at the important words. Then you do all the biblical research. Then you see how it's connected to other texts in the Bible because the Bible is a chorus of different voices and not a solo. Then you do a little research on the text, church history, and Presbyterian theology. And finally, I was taught to do one more thing. And this is the real litmus test: Does what you're going to preach or teach from the Bible increase love of God and neighbor? If it does, it's the Word of God. If it doesn't,

then it is not. At the end of all that work, it's love that matters; "agape love." I John is saying the same thing.

A friend of mine recently told me about a new book she was reading. The book is entitled *Separation of Church and Hate*. I think the title is interesting. It's written by comedian John Fugalsang. The point of the book is to challenge the extreme right's corruption of Christian faith to support their right wing, exclusionary agenda. Christian nationalism and other extreme right religious communities often misquote the Bible, or take a verse out of context, to support their world view. And because they quote the Bible, people tend to believe it must be the truth. But it's not. Rather it's a view of religion that is based on power, not love. And so you get white supremacy, male dominance, exclusion, self-righteousness, racism, and hate. I John would clearly call it "the way of Cain," and not "the way of Jesus." Other texts in the Bible called it "the spirit of the anti-Christ."

Separation of Church and Hate. For the last few years, I've believed that is the most important thing we can do as a church. Rather than reflect the fear and anger and hate of the world around us, including politics, we are to be a different kind of community. We are to be a church that has the courage to be a community of agape love. Or as I John encourages us: "Little children, let us love, not in word and speech, but in truth and action." (I John 3:18) Amen to that.