

“Testing the Spirits”
1 John 4:1-6, John 14:15-17
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First United Methodist Church, Baraboo
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This month we’re getting to know “the elder”, that “pastor and teacher who knew about Jesus mostly through the gospel of John. In their community, they shared “koininia” – fellowship with each other and with God. Reading 1 John you can tell the Elder really loved his people. They were his “beloved” his “little children.” It’s because he cares so much that he’s now so troubled. There was a church fight going on over ideas spread by false prophets.

The false prophets lured some people away and more could be leaving soon. You can sense “The Elder’s” pain at losing those he has grown to love. He’s on the defensive. Can you hear it in the “us vs. them” language? You either walk in the light or you walk in the darkness. You either have the spirit of Christ or the spirit of the anti-Christ. You are either with God or you are siding with “the world.” You either have the spirit of truth or the spirit of error.

We don’t know exactly what these false prophets teaching but it has something to do with denying the incarnation. The “false prophets” may have been people who said “Jesus wasn’t really human. On the cross he didn’t really die. He really just returned to a purely spiritual state that he had actually been in all along.” Implied here is that spirit is good and matter (or bodies) are bad. Jesus was good. So he must have been all spirit because bodies get in the way of us knowing the pure truth.”

The Elder taught something different: the Word became flesh. God became a person, Jesus of Nazareth. The Christian faith is not just a purely spiritual thing. It is about bodies and spirits together.” After all, our bodies can be temples of the Holy Spirit. Salvation involves our whole being. God came to us in a body so we can have “koininia” (fellowship/closeness/intimacy) with God and each other. God is with us, in real, human interactions. There were some who denied all this. The incarnation was at the heart of the church fight The Elder was dealing with.

To find a way through this conflict meant “testing the spirits.” Setting up a way to measure what is of God and what can’t be of God. I’ll tell you how he does that in a minute but first let’s think about the context. We don’t know for sure where “the Elder” lived. It could have been Ephesus. Church tradition says the gospel of John was read among the people at the church at Ephesus. And this would have been “The Elder’s” community too. Ephesus was one of the biggest commercial centers of the ancient world. And like any other large, cosmopolitan seaport city people from all over the known world at the time visited there. Many came to worship at the temple of Artemis/Diana. The cult of Diana was what brought lots of people and lots of

money to town. Besides the cult of Diana, lots of other religions would have been competing with each other, just like there was competition among sellers in the marketplace. “The elder” knew that if his flock were lured away from the community, there were people on the next corner ready to sell them a new religion. That made knowing how to “test the spirits” all the more important. So, here’s how “the Elder” said we are to separate truth from false teaching.

First he encouraged them. You can figure out this out. 1 John 2:26-27 he says “I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.” In other words, “I trust you to figure this out because you have Christ, you are abiding in him”. You’ve been given the Spirit of Truth. As it says in John 14:17 “This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you and he will be in you.” So here’s how we test the spirits: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.” How does this teaching/action/belief match up with the incarnation? “The Elder” says the test of whether something is of God is: how does this match up with a belief in God coming to us in a body?

I believe this teaching by “The Elder” of the “testing of the spirits” isn’t just about a long ago conflict in a place like ancient Ephesus. I believe the “testing of the spirits” is about us today too. The Elder teaches that the incarnation is our guide. Here’s how I’d rephrase the elder’s test: does this action/this choice/this belief lead to the flourishing of life? God’s desire is that this world – and all life in it including us – flourish here and now. Does this idea/action/belief lead to the flourishing of life?

There might not be false prophets on every street corner luring us away to other religions today. But there are forces that seek to diminish life for us: apathy, cynicism, like poverty and environmental degradation. When I look around for people doing a good job of “testing the spirits” I think of Brenda Nickels of Abiding Harvest UMC in Broken Arrow, OK (a suburb of Tulsa). Let me tell you her story. She’s a kind of modern day “elder” who points us towards what it means to believe in the incarnation today. Brenda grew up on a farm. But she never got interested in gardening until she was an adult. She realized there was food insecurity in her neighborhood (people hovering on the edge of not having enough to eat). Her suburban church had lots of land, much of it wooded. There was a field overgrown with brush. Brenda Nickels felt God nudging her to bring this need and the church’s resource together. Brenda knew God desired the flourishing of all life here and now.

The seed for Abiding Harvest community Garden was planted in 2009. It took five years for the seed of that idea to germinate. It took two years just to get the site

prepared using the “Back to Eden” permaculture method. That involves the use of mulch as soil protection, reducing the need for weeding and daily watering. A local tree service donated mulch. In the summer 2018 issue of “New World Outlook” article, it says Abiding Harvest UMC started composting member’s food scraps. They also invited community members to dump food scraps in the compost bin in the church’s parking lot. It’s going to take three more years for the garden to completely mature and produce better yields, but even in its first year, the garden produced enough fresh vegetables to contribute to a local food pantry. The church is doing even more to promote the flourishing of life in their corner of the world. They have turned the parking lot median strip into a *Monarch Waystation*. Members have planted milkweed for migrating monarch butterflies. Some church members are even raising monarchs from eggs.

Brenda Nickel says “... the main thing is that God is glorified through all this and people are blessed. We have great hopes this year of doubling our yield.” Some Tulsa 9th grade students contacted her about an AP project in the garden. Others outside the church are coming to help. “Veggies” says Brenda “are the bonus; relationships and inviting others to participate in the process – that’s the blessing.”

The need to “test the spirits” and find out what is of God and what isn’t of God is as real today as it has ever been. Brenda Nickels and Abiding Harvest Community Garden have been “testing the spirits” and living their belief in the incarnation. God cares about bodies. She and her church are “staying in love with God” and neighbor as they show love for God’s creation, the earth. At this moment in time, I believe our love for God cannot be separated from our love for God’s creation. The “testing of the spirits” that we need today is to ask this question: does this action/attitude/idea lead to a greater love for the earth? Does it help me be a good steward so I can help promote the flourishing of all life

A few weeks ago I told a story about the theologian/cosmologist/priest Thomas Berry. As a young child he had a mystical experience of God in a meadow near his North Carolina home. And he made it his life’s work to promote the well being of spaces like that meadow. You can’t know God apart from knowing well the place where you live, said Thomas Berry. As an adult he “tested the spirits” by asking: does this actions/attitudes/policies promote the flourishing of this meadow (and places like this)? If so, then it is of God. Genesis 2:15 we are given responsibility to “avad and Shamar” the earth: to serve (conserve) and keep/protect this planet home. We are called to be earth keepers. There is now an official designation for those with special training and a passion for creation care given by General Board of Global Ministries called “Earthkeepers.” Brenda Nickel is one. Given the current reality of the health of our world ecosystems, I think we are failing to stay in love with God if we leave out the part of loving God that involves caring for the earth.

The good news is that God really thought this world, our bodies and our spirits both were worth redeeming. God really was in Christ reconciling the world. Jesus really is the word made flesh. Jesus said “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” We really can do our own “testing of the spirits” and choose what leads to abundant life; leads to the flourishing all life on this earth, this earth home which God has entrusted to our care. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.