



The Victory that Conquers the World

1 John 5:1-5

Senior Adult Day
May 21, 2006

For a letter that talks so much about love, it's a real surprise when 1 John talks about conquering the world. It's even more of a surprise when you consider where this letter came from. It likely came from a little throng of believers in Ephesus, the great provincial capital of Asia Minor. This little church must have felt like a tiny boat in the midst of a sea of people who worshipped everything except Jesus. In the midst of a world of many gods and lords, this little church was one of the few pockets of people who dared to say, "Jesus is Lord." And yet their spiritual shepherd, John the Elder, told them that they will conquer the world. As the British say, "Rather cheeky, that."

It was not only a gutsy thing to say, it was also a curious thing to say. What exactly did John mean by "conquering the world?" Surely he wasn't talking about military/political domination. What can anyone mean by conquering the world?

Sometimes we can understand a positive statement by first understanding a negative statement. It's called the *via negativa*. So let's turn this around and ask what does it mean when the world conquers us? Now *that* we can relate to. Ever heard the expression, "He's got the weight of the world on his shoulders"? Ever heard someone say, "This ol' world has just beaten me down"? We understand. Life is tough; it will grab you by the throat; it will give you bad breaks, grief and loss. We all at one time or another have felt beaten down and conquered by the world.

There is in fact a stress test that measures this. (*Holmes – Rahe Stress Test*) You take it by checking a list of events that may have happened to you in the last twelve months. Each event counts for so many points of stress. Here's a few examples from that list. If you've been through Christmas in the last twelve months, that's 12 points' worth of stress. If you've started or finished school in the last year, that's 26 points. Had a good friend to die, 37 points, become pregnant, 40 points. Retired, 45 points. Fired from work, 50 points. Been in jail, 63 points. And if your spouse has died in the last twelve months, that's 100 points' worth of stress. Add those points up, and you begin to get an idea of the extent to which the world has been beating you down.

Now I am beginning to understand a little of what John the Elder was talking about: conquering the world can mean rising above the stresses and tragedies and losses of life. John says the love of God can help us to conquer the world with all its sadness and anxiety.

But I think John the Elder means even more than that. To him, the way of God is the way of love. And John is convinced that the way of the world is opposed to the way

of love. The evangelist C. H. Spurgeon once said there is something in the world that is antagonistic to love. Something about the world has a way of taking our love and twisting it into despair.

Look back to that little church in Ephesus. All around them the culture operated on the basis of not love but power. Caesar had the power of life or death over the Empire. Husbands had the power of life or death over their families. Slave owners had power over their slaves. The whole land was stratified up and down into one giant continuous pecking order. But not the church! The church was the one place in the world where male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, could all gather together on the same level before Jesus Christ. The church was the one place in the world where all were one in the bond of love. So John wrote, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God..." And John also wrote, "whatever is born of God conquers the world." In church, the love of God made possible a new kind of community that will eventually conquer the world.

Across the centuries we can see how love has conquered. In time most people have accepted that slavery is wrong. In our families we have heads of households but not dictators of households, usually. And in the nations of the world, the day of rulers with life or death power over their subjects is coming to an end. I believe the driving force behind all these changes is the spread of the gospel. The love of God is slowly conquering the world.

I say "slowly" because love still has a long way to go. Our world today still worships power. Everyone is looking to get ahead, everyone is looking to get that edge over the other guy, by getting more economic power than the other guy, or more social power, or more political power. Name any arena of life in this world, and in that arena people are vying with each other to be ahead in the pecking order.

But in the midst of this power hungry world, the church is an embassy of love. The church, when it remembers to be the church, is the one place in this world where all kinds of people, bosses and employees, rich and poor, big shots and ordinary people, can all come together on the same level before the cross of Christ. The church is where we also all come together on the same level before the commandments of Christ, the first two being love God and love your neighbor. We stand united by the love and by the commands of God. The very language we use in church hints of this unity. When I was ordained into the ministry, I asked my fellow student, Robert Feagle, to preach the ordination sermon. Now Robert was a country boy from a country church, so whenever he referred to me in his remarks, he always called me "Brother Doug." Brother Doug this, and brother Doug that. In suburban Raleigh we didn't talk that way much anymore, so I was a little bit embarrassed. But deep down, I was proud to be called Robert's brother. Maybe we should call each other "brother" or "sister" more often, for by the love of God and by the command of God that is what we are to each other, brothers and sisters in Christ.

There is one time in our worship life that I always get to say it: when I baptize someone. After I ask, “Do you believe that Jesus is your Savior and your Lord?” and the person says, “I do,” then I get to say, “Then I baptize you *my sister*... (or) I baptize you *my brother*.” He or she may be nine years old, or ninety year old, but at that moment, he is my brother, she is my sister. Nowhere else in this power hungry, status-obsessed land can you find togetherness quite like that. The power of God’s love conquers the ways of the world!

Notice now that I’ve been talking for ten minutes and have managed not to say a single word about Senior Adults on Senior Adult Day. But I really do believe that if there is anyone that can overcome the world by the love and the command of God, it is senior adults! What kind of world do senior adults live in? What stresses threaten to beat them down? And what part do senior adults play in overcoming the way of the world by the loving, commanding God?

The world that senior adults live in is a world of staggering change. Our senior adults remember when electricity in the homes and airplanes in the skies were new. They grew up during the Depression when you never threw anything away. They went off to World War Two and Korea and they sent their children to Vietnam. And they have lived to see things they never thought they would see: men on the moon, computers in every home, and cell phones in every pocket.

Besides the stress of all that change, senior adults face the stress of worrying about their children, the stress of worrying about their bodies, even the stress of just getting up in the morning. Garrison Keillor tells of one woman’s getting-up routine. She sits up in bed, swings her legs over the side, holds her arms out toward the dresser a few feet away, and then slides to the floor, topples over toward the dresser, and catches herself, and she is up! (and by then definitely wide-awake!) She will tell you, “Growing old is not for the timid.”

In fact some senior adults find growing old so tough that there is a growing problem of drug addiction among seniors. As baby boomers age, more and more resort to self-medication. They may take booze or Oxycontin to deaden the pain of aging bodies; they may take Valium or Xanax to deaden the pain of losing friends and family. There is much in the world that threatens to beat senior adults down.

But senior adults of faith have found the best medicine for what ails them: love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Senior adults who have gone out into the world with that mission have found that the world can beat them down no longer, on the contrary, they have overcome the world.

Let me give two examples, one from fifty years ago and one from today. The movie *Shadowlands* tells the love story of C. S. Lewis and Joy Gresham. C. S. Lewis was an Oxford professor and a senior citizen around sixty. Joy Gresham, an American, was a younger widow and single mother. He married her, not for love, but to enable her to stay in England. But then Lewis came to love Joy, and she loved him. Then Joy was

stricken with cancer, and Lewis cared for her. They were married for less than four years before the cancer took her, but during that time, he was a model husband. In turn, Joy gave Lewis happiness that he had never experienced before. They cherished each other, and C. S. Lewis willingly made sacrifices for the sake of his wife.

C. S. Lewis had once been a prideful, competitive Oxford professor, who professed the love of God, but did not really know the depths of it until he met Joy. Then for her Lewis began to practice the command of God to love neighbor to the point of costly sacrifice. Love can overcome the world.

But I also think of someone closer to home, a senior adult in this church. Miss Janie Griffin is not able to come to worship now, but I will always remember what she taught me about love overcoming the world. Miss Janie doesn't have a lot of family. She could have descended into a very lonely life. She could have spent her days holed up in her home. But this is what she did. She practiced what I call the "Janie Griffin Ministry of Hospitality." She got herself on the phone and invited people to coffee. She invited people to lunch. And then she got in her car and picked up her guests, and took them to her favorite places. Now, many of her guests, seeing how she drove the streets of Wilson, learned to say, "That's all right, Miss Janie, I'll just meet you there." And some of her guests were embarrassed by her gruff ways. I mean, if the coffee wasn't piping hot, woe be unto that unfortunate waitress! But after I got used to that, I began to understand what she was doing. She was not going to let the world beat her down. By obeying the command of God, by loving her neighbors with hospitality, Miss Janie was conquering the world.

That's what John was talking about. If you believe in Jesus, then you are born of God, and anything born of God will conquer over the cares of this world. If you love God you will practice God's commands of love, and then the ways of love will always conquer the power plays of this world.

So, go forth and conquer!

-- Douglas E. Murray