

ASSURANCE

SERIES—COMPLETE JOY: THE MESSAGE OF FIRST JOHN

A sermon by Jeff Biggs, Sunday May 3, 2009, Church of St John the Evangelist, Hamilton.

There's a cute advertisement on the TV right now, I can't remember exactly which eatery it's for, I think that it's McDonald's. Anyway, it's all about a conversation between a maybe 12 year old girl and her father, and she asks him if he wishes that she was a boy. After a couple of clumsy attempts to convince her that she's special, he finishes off the commercial with, "If you were a boy, then who would be my little girl?" Which makes her smile, and sweet soppy music plays, and we're all convinced that he's said the right thing to reassure her that he really loves her just the way she is. As an aside, I'm not sure exactly how, "If you were a boy, then who would be my little girl?" is supposed to reassure her – it seems to me like he's rather avoiding the issue. The context of the advertisement is clear, they're at a coffee shop either on their way from or on their way to, her hockey practice. She's got all her hockey gear in a duffel bag. She catches her father looking out the window at a group of boys on their way to or from hockey practice. In a flash, or perhaps as the capstone of a growing suspicion, our heroine has drawn a conclusion about gender roles: it is not standard behaviour in our culture for girls to play hockey. It IS standard behaviour for boys to play hockey. Her father has clearly been encouraging her for some time to play hockey. Her father has been spotted staring wistfully at boys playing hockey. Perhaps her father is, within our culture's norms, treating her like a boy because he wanted her to be a boy, and in fact, still wants her to be a boy. In his eyes, perhaps SHE doesn't really exist as such, she's just a substitute boy. A disturbing thought for anyone. One that would bother anyone in an intimate relationship, daughter-father or otherwise. And so, as a result of the actions that she sees him taking (his encouragement of hockey as a pastime, and his stares at the boys) she draws a conclusion: Dad doesn't really love me – he just loves what he can pretend that I am. When she calls him on this, his rather feeble explanations actually make things worse: he attempts to explain why he loves her just the way she is by asking, in multiple ways, if she were a boy, who would he teach hockey to? Since the obvious answer is, just about any boy she knows, his words fail to reassure. Then comes his kitchy line about her being Daddy's little girl, and the ad ends and we go buy an Iced Capp. But I think that for most REAL people concerned about the sincerity of their beloved's attention, his words would fail to mollify. His words, would fail to reassure. Not because his words aren't sweet, but they're belied, in this simplified instance, by his actions.

I think that this sort of problem runs rampant through our society and through the church. We worry, not based on words—we've got plenty of words!—but on actions, and on fears, that our relationships are not what we want them to be. The reassurance seeking girlfriend batting her eyes and asking her partner just, 'why it is that you love me?' is a cliché. The workaholic executive constantly requiring affirmation of his status through cars, vacations, women and conspicuous consumption is nearing the same status. Apart from these two archetypes, I think most of us, certainly myself, regularly feel the desire to be reassured that, yes, the people around us who we respect, care about, or desperately desire to impress, do, in fact, look at us the way we want to be seen. It's destructive. It's dangerous. It's self-centered. It's all too common.

I think today's reading from 1 John (Chapter 3:16-24) can say a lot to us in this regard.

¹⁶*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.* ¹⁷*How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?*

¹⁸*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

¹⁹*And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him* ²⁰*whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.* ²¹*Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God;* ²²*and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.*

²³*And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.* ²⁴*All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.*

Because I'm a post-modern, not a modern, I'm not going to invoke one of the great Protestant theological exaggerations and claim that this passage is about "assurance". This passage is NOT about 'knowing that you are saved'. What I think this passage is about, is "reassurance". Or, rather, it's about how to live in such a way as to leave no room for others to seek reassurance from you. It's about living an authentic life – a life that leaves no room (or at least, precious little room) for doubt. Not your own doubts, but for other people's doubts about you, and specifically, about what the role of God is in your life. Or perhaps, rather, what your role is in God's life. In this passage John gives (gasp – surprise, surprise) 3 ways by which we ('his little children') can live lives that show others and each other who God is: the theological, the moral and the practical.

I'd say that John gives us theological instruction in, for instance, verse 23: *this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ*. Pretty solid ground here – believe in Jesus! Hardly surprising to see this sort of thing in the Bible. But let's unpack that a bit, because it's more than just saying that I intellectually assent to something. If I say that, for instance, I believe in Santa Claus, I'm saying more than just that I think that there's a jolly old man in a red suit who lives at the North Pole, rides a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer, and takes an inordinate interest in the daily decisions of children. If I believe in Santa Claus, you can expect that I make room for Santa in my life: I'll try to make better decisions because I know that Santa is watching. I'll write Santa a Christmas Wish List letter asking for an X-Box. I'll leave out milk, cookies and a carrot. I'll make sure the fire is out on Christmas Eve. My belief in Santa is more than just an inner conviction – my belief creates a demand for action. The types of action that I know are appropriate to my relationship with Santa. I think in Baptism we can see a great example of the difference between belief and assent. BLARGH and Ishtar, and all of us, are going to be making some statements of belief on Sophie's behalf. What will show whether we are simply assenting, or really believe, will be the space we then make for those beliefs to play out their full implications. Will we pray for Sophie? Will we pray with Sophie? Will we show Sophie the things that God is doing in our life? Will we create opportunities for her to encounter God in hers? It is when our belief takes this 4 dimensional shape, through time and space, that we leave no room for others (and certainly not Sophie) to question our sincerity.

John also gives us some moral advice; I think the best example is in verse 24. *All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them*. John doesn't just call us to believe in Jesus, but to obey him. Now, there is a great deal of mostly unfortunate, occasionally very enlightening debate about what God's commandments to us actually are. Most of that debate takes place, mercifully, at the fringes. Some things are easy and rock solid. Don't steal. Don't commit murder. Don't speak flippantly about God. Do serve the poor. Do pray for your enemies. Do tell others about what God is doing in your life. Do live as though you have nothing to fear from death, because you don't. These commandments are easy enough to understand. For the moment, let's pretend that other, more debated commandments regarding sex and money are easily understood as well, because the substance of a moral life is not what I really want to emphasize here. What I want to stress, is that John calls us not to live in a certain way, but to OBEY. He calls us to lay down what we may want to do, whether that motive is good or ill, and be submissive to God, for submissions own sake. I think there's a great deal of integrity there – when people around you see that not only do you create a space for your beliefs in your life, but that you restrain the freedom that you obviously have, for the sake of your God, then they have confidence in what you are about. There's precious little need

to seek reassurance about someone's Christian intent, when you see them closing doors that they could happily walk through, for the sake of submission.

In Baptism, again, we provide an opportunity for this obedience to play itself out. Alex and Ishtar, you, in particular, are making promises today. Most of those promises only Sophie and God will know whether you keep. Many of them may, at various times, be inconvenient, limiting and frustrating for you to keep. But Sophie will see, and Sophie will know, consciously or not, whether you have kept them. You have a mighty opportunity, in Baptizing Sophie, in making these promises, and then in holding yourself in obedience to them, to become the single greatest testimony that she will ever know, to the significance of God in your life. If you are obedient to God's commands, she will know, and will have precious little need for reassurance about where you stand.

Finally, and, I think, most importantly, John gives us practical guidance about how to live a life that inspires no need for reassurance. Most eloquently, he lays it out in verses 16-18: *We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.* We will leave no doubts in anyone's mind about who we are, and about what we mean when we say that we are following Jesus, or are building the Kingdom of God, or that we are spreading the Good News, if we love them. And lest John be misinterpreted, he lays out explicitly what he means by love, when he asks *How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?* I'm not just talking about Out Of The Cold, or Micah House, or having an international Sponsored Child (or two!) – worthy as these things are. We have brothers and sisters in need all around us, in need of things other than food and shelter. In need of companionship. In need of a listening ear. In need of a warm smile and a hug. In need of an opportunity. Occasionally in need of a good swift kick in the pants! More often in need of simple acts of daily love. Combine the space created by belief and willful submission through obedience with love for your brothers and sisters, and no one will have any doubt about who you are and what you're about. BLARGH and Ishtar: combine belief, obedience and love in your family, and Sophie will never have any doubt either. This isn't to say that we can brainwash our children into faith in three easy steps any more than I'm saying that we can punch a ticket to heaven in three easy steps. What I am saying is that our children need never doubt who we are or what we believe, and they won't, if we live in belief, obedience and love.

Let's return to the little girl in McDonald's and her father. A cute 30 second commercial intended to make us thirsty for some coffee and some family love. So I'm probably overblowing this – but I don't think John would like it. First,

while we're intended to think of the major problem in the ad being the girl's insecurity, but it is her father's inconsistent actions that have caused her to seek reassurance. Second, while his words are nice, it is unrealistic to believe that his sweet sentiment would erase her doubt as effectively as it seems to. Words are good, words are important, but when doubts are created by actions, it takes actions, not words to address them. Finally, I'd much rather see the father offer to take some action that will reassure his daughter. Perhaps offer to do something with her that isn't hockey – though I admit that I might be reading too much into his clear obsession with hockey here – maybe his daughter really is as into the sport as he is – I've certainly known several women who are as rabid hockey fans as they come. My point, though, is that while some of the daughter's insecurity may come from within herself, I suspect most of it comes from her Dad. This is the same as in the People of God. It has been popularly expressed repeatedly in recent years by non-Christian media commentators, that most people's objection to Christianity isn't Christ, it's Christians, who, to quote a band "acknowledge Jesus with their lips, but deny him with their lives. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable." Let us remember then, at John's instruction, to *love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

Amen.