

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Easter 6B, May 5, 2024
1 John 5:1-6
Conquering through Faith

- ☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!
- ☑ **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is an intriguing verse in our Second Lesson — the reading from First John. It is a verse about conquering “the world.” It goes this way:

for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. (1 John 5:4)

This is impressive language — to speak of conquering the world. It might put us in mind of the saying about Alexander the Great — how he responded when he had conquered everything in sight. The saying goes this way:

Then he sat down and wept because there were no other worlds for him to conquer.¹

But that is not what St. John is talking about, is it? The apostle is not talking about military conquest. “Put your sword away!” Jesus commanded Peter (John 18:11). Peter had cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant — a poor fellow named Malchus. But that is not what Christ’s kingdom is like. It is not won with the sword.

I think that St. John’s saying about conquering the world is more along the lines of a great saying credited to Abraham Lincoln. Here is one of the versions I found on the internet:

In a speech Abraham Lincoln delivered at the height of the Civil War, he referred to the Southerners as fellow human beings who were in error. An elderly lady

¹<https://www.gatewaytotheclassics.com/browse/display.php?author=baldwin&book=thirty&story=alexander&PHPSESSID=6906dddc188ece52252f843b544aa365>

chastised him for not calling them irreconcilable enemies who must be destroyed. "Why, madam," Lincoln replied, "do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"²

The logic is clear and strong. I destroy my enemy if I can somehow win my enemy, so that hatred is replaced by friendship.

St. John feels that it is right and fitting that Christians should conquer the world. Let's investigate this idea. Let me speak first of the duty to do so—the duty to conquer the world. Second, let's consider the peculiar weapon we are to use. I mean, our faith. And finally, let us speak of the inevitability of victory. We human beings can pour out our strength and our years on forlorn projects. But fighting for Christ's kingdom is not one of them, not a forlorn project. It is not a helpless project, but one well worth striving for.

So first, our *duty* to conquer the world. Till Jesus comes again, to be a Christian means that there are plenty of worlds left for us to conquer. We are not like Alexander the Great, sad because we have defeated everyone in sight. No, for us, there is plenty of fighting still to do, whether we are young or old. Let me rather quickly speak of three worlds worthy of our contention. I begin large, speaking of the whole wide world. Then I narrow things down to our neighbors. And then I narrow things still more, pointing to ourselves.

So, about the whole wide world. We have a duty to conquer this big world, or at least to lend our hands to the project. This is what we mean when we say that the church is "catholic." We mean that Jesus wants us to go to the very ends of the earth and to win souls to him. There is to be no discrimination, no prejudice. Jesus desires *everyone* on this globe. And so, national churches have missionaries, and local congregations like ours, can and should support the missionaries.

Let me repeat a few lines from Pastor Carol's recent Good Friday sermon. She gave us some statistics about the work that is still to be done in bringing Jesus to this big, wide world. She said this:

Believe it or not, even though the gospel message has spread to every corner of the earth, there are still many people in this world who have never heard about Jesus. In the mission world they are called "unreached people groups." According to some statistics, there are over seven thousand unreached people groups in the world, comprising about 42% of the world's population. That's a lot of people! That's a huge mission field!

²https://www.reddit.com/r/quotes/comments/4xhz54/i_destroy_my_enemy_when_i_make_him_my_friend/?rdt=48601

Our congregation helps with this. Recently our Board of Deacons decided to include a benevolence offering to a great mission effort in Kenya.

Let me narrow the focus some: We also have a duty to conquer our neighbors — not just the big, wide world, but also our friends and neighbors. A strange thing these days is that Africa is sending missionaries to the United States. I am grateful for that because our land is becoming more and more secular, and we could use help in trying to forge friendships between Jesus and our neighbors. We can no longer afford to think that, of course, everyone knows something good and true about Jesus. Nowadays, introducing people to Jesus is not just a matter of witnessing in far-off islands or lands, but also, right here in New York City.

And then there is a world to be conquered in each of us. And if we do not conquer this individual, personal world, we might be disinclined to try to conquer larger worlds. Remember Luther's three traditional enemies of humanity: sin, death, and the devil. I am speaking now of sin — of a whole *world* of sin that beckons to us. If we lived in monasteries or convents, maybe it would be easier to resist the beckoning world of sin, though I am not sure about that. It might be that the devil is so clever that he can tempt even cloistered people. In any event, you and I have a fight before us every day of our lives. St. Paul even speaks of it. He calls it "the good fight of faith." And so he gives this charge to Timothy:

¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. (1 Timothy 6:12, RSV)

St. Paul also teaches us that for this good fight of faith, we should put on the "full armor of God" (Ephesians 6). I mean to speak of the full armor in a few minutes. In any case, this brings me to my second point in this sermon: Our weapons as we strive to conquer the world.

In our text, St. John speaks of our faith as our weapon:

And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.
(1 John 5:4, NRSV)

He expands on this by also speaking of love and of obeying the commandments:

²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his

commandments are not burdensome... (1 John 6:2-3, NRSV)

Today's Gospel Lesson also connects "love" with the holy "commandments." And so Jesus says this:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. (John 15:9-10, NRSV)

St. John, then, points to faith, love, and the commandments as our weapons in the fight to conquer the world.

St. Paul would agree with this and gives some more details in his famous passage about the whole armor of God. That passage goes this way:

¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication... (Ephesians 6:11-18, NRSV)

Gosh! I bet Pastor Carol, Pastor Lara, and I could do a whole Lent series of sermons on this text, lingering sermon by sermon with the parts of our armor: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit, and prayer.

"Put up your sword, Peter," commanded Jesus. In our work to conquer the world, we are not to use violence, but faith and all the good things connected with faith.

Finally, let me speak of the inevitability of victory. Trying to conquer the world for Jesus is not wasted energy. It is more along the lines of saving folks from unnecessary suffering. Imagine that a loved one is sick with a fever. You have called the physician. He or she is on the way. He has the essential medicine and skill and he will save your friend if your friend is willing. But till the doctor gets here, there are still good things you can do for your loved one. You can keep him company, keep her company. You can buy saltines and ginger ale and make chicken soup. You can stop your friend from straying outdoors in his fever. You can fetch things. Perhaps you can massage aching muscles. You can give hope to your friend.

Sin is fever. When St. John says that Christians are to conquer the world, he means conquer a feverish world. The Physician is coming. We confess it in the Creed:

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord...He will come again to judge the living and the dead. (Apostles' Creed, Article 3)

St. Paul describes the coming of our Lord in universal terms:

⁸And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2:8-11, RSV)

Did you catch the unanimous tone of what St. Paul is saying?

¹⁰that at the name of Jesus *every* knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and *every* tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Whatever we can do beforehand, then, to help conquer the world is good work. Jesus does not want sin. He does not want people suffering from the fever of sin. Our whole, wide world is headed toward bowing before Jesus. If we can help get them ready — and help get ourselves ready too — it will be good and rational work for us.

John wants us to conquer the world. That means the whole, wide world, but also our neighbors and ourselves. The apostle wants us to conquer these

worlds because he does not want the world to go on being rocked by sin. He does not want so much misery, so much chaos, to continue in this world. He says that we have a weapon ready at hand for conquering the world. He means our faith in Jesus. So, let us not just *live* in the world, but also go about *conquering* the world, for the sake of our neighbors, ourselves, and to the glory of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**