**Discerning True Spirit**

**Narrative Lectionary**

**July 8, 2018**

1 John 4: 1-6 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Friday night while I was having a bit of sermon writers block, I was looking at twitter and came across a tweet by [Brandan Robertson](http://www.brandanrobertson.com/) that tied in with what I was reflecting on for today. Brandan is a progressive evangelical who has moved a from fundamentalist fear based view of God to a more open progressive understanding of theology and a God of love and grace. Progressive evangelicals are also more open to welcoming LGBTQ people in the church/faith communities. He tweeted:

The amount of conservative Christians who believe they have the corner on the Truth is always surprising to me. It should be – a theology of crafted in the image of a god of judgement and arrogance breeds the same. But dang…whatever happened to adopting the attitude of Jesus?

I’d say he’s referring to the attitude of Jesus as one of love, compassion, and non-judgement. There are real divisions within Christianity these days. Perhaps not much more than in the past, but we certainly are more aware of it with modern media. When there are such divisions, how do we know what Truth is? We each have our own perspectives on Truth, what is right and what we believe God wants from us and for us. The question can be, how do we know and discern that truth?

The passage from First John 4 has some guidance on this. During the time that the letter was written, there were groups of the community who were saying that Jesus did not actually occupy flesh, and did not have a bodily resurrection. So the author was saying that they were false teachers, led by a false spirit. There is a comment that these false spirits are the Antichrist, which is not one person as we might traditionally understand this term to mean, but anyone that engages in false teaching against Christ. False prophets have always been a part of the church and their influence has been substantial. This is evidenced by the fact that, instead of viewing the Christian faith as one of love, a majority of people today see the church as judgmental, exclusive, anti-science and out of touch with reality. Our challenge as followers of Jesus is to turn a deaf ear to today’s false prophets and to follow the Spirit’s leading along the difficult and sometimes costly path of love. It is also important for us to proclaim in our communities the gospel as we understand it, that people hear the different message of love, justice and compassion. The passage affirms that those who say that Jesus has come in the flesh and has come from God, theirs is of the Spirit of God. This may have worked back then, but what about when two groups of Christians are disagreeing and both claim that Jesus came in the flesh and is from God?

If we keep reading in the chapter we get more guidance. “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” When two sides have different theological positions on something, love can be the determining factor.

I found this to be true, a number of years ago when I was sorting out my sexuality and place in the church. It was 1984 and the church was beginning the debate of whether gays and lesbians could be ministers. I was discerning myself whether God accepted me as a gay person or whether I needed to change, and at that time believed God could change me. I was obsessed with figuring it out until I came to a point where I let go of worrying about it and gave it up to God in prayer. This was near the beginning of the summer during which I read all the material that I could and went to workshops on both sides. By the end of the summer, I reflected on the experience and the two perspectives I was hearing from. On the one side, the side against homosexual ministers, I experienced, fear, judgement and even hate. On the other side, I experienced love, compassion and forgiveness. I did not know the God of fear and judgement, I knew the God of love and compassion. So that was my answer of what was right for me. I could be gay, and be a minister and God would accept and love me. God is love and we are called to love one another.

Out of this debate, one of the main challenges for the United Church that we kept hearing was what do we believe about the authority of scripture. So out of this, in typical United Church fashion, a task group was established to provide a resource and guide for what we believe about scripture and its authority for us. This resource came up with what I think are some helpful guidelines. The report on [The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture](https://commons.united-church.ca/Documents/What%20We%20Believe%20and%20Why/Theology%20and%20Mission%20of%20the%20Church/The%20Authority%20and%20Interpretation%20of%20Scripture.pdf) identified the following standards evaluating any claim to authority regarding scripture:

God’s historic self-revelation in Jesus Christ is crucial in establishing what has legitimate authority in Christian community.

Legitimate authority, in every case, enhances community of the whole created earth.

The Word of God, in every case, is larger than the text of the bible.

The one that stands out for me in this is that legitimate authority enhances the community of the whole earth. This means that if an interpretation or understanding of scripture is demeaning or harmful to anyone or to the earth, it is not a faithful understanding of scripture. I believe this is a good guideline for us all to consider. It seems to come back to love – loving one another, loving the earth.

Yesterday, I attended the Multi-Faith Saskatchewan annual general meeting and as we discern the future for the organization we had a discussion about why Multi-Faith dialogue is important to us. There was a common theme regarding the common values we hold and the need to honour and celebrate the diversity in our communities and that can only be done through getting to know each other and the opportunities to learn about our common values and our differences. One of those common values is love. Almost all religions have a common value of loving your neighbour. One story told by Glen Zimmer of The Qu’Appelle House of Prayer, was that one time he had a group of Hindu youth there who came to see the site as part of a camp by the Hindu Temple. The House of Prayer had a section in the chapel that had symbols of each faith. He described the boys as all over the place and not listening and one boy ran off into the chapel. There he saw the Hindu symbol and exclaimed, “Hey guys, that’s us, we’re here too!”. It was an affirmation that they were included and important. That welcome is important for us all to offer as part of loving one another. When the Bible says love one another because love is from God, I believe it is universal, not just limited to Christianity. So we are all called to love, everyone, especially our neighbours who are becoming more and more diverse, which should be seen as a gift. May we celebrate that gift of diversity more and more.

May we hold to the standard of love as a guide for following Jesus and understanding who Jesus calls us to be. May we be bold to proclaim our faith of love and justice especially to those who have a negative view of church. May we love one another and see God in that love in all that we do.