### “Faith Conquers the World” Steve Finlan for The First Church, May 5, 2024

**1 John 5:1–5**

1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. 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, 4for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. 5Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

**John 15:9–17**

9“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. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12 “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Good morning. I hope the mild weather contributes to optimistic feelings, although part of my message today will be about not letting ourselves be controlled by the surrounding environment.

What is it about faith that enables John to say, “whatever is born of God conquers the world. This is the victory that conquers the world, our faith” (1 John 5:4)? Is it the courage and calmness of faith that gives it that power? Is it the way faith joins with love to bind people together in unity? Is it the joy that comes from practicing love?

In the gospel we read that Jesus wants the disciples to live in his love, so “that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). Joy certainly would have power; would it be powerful enough to speak about conquering the world? Now, that conquering language does not seem to be literal—we are not *militarily* conquering the world. So what does it mean?

Let’s look for clues in the gospel passage. The emphasis there is that Jesus will no longer call the apostles his servants, but his friends. They will obey out of love, rather than out of slavish subservience. Their obedience is joyous, their loyalty voluntary, their decisions mature, their liberty spiritual. He trusts them to make this kind of progress. They made progress because of their friendship with Jesus. Now, the friends of Jesus should be friends of each other. Jesus calls *you* a friend, too. Along with such friendship comes knowledge. He says, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (15:15). He appointed us today just as he appointed his disciples then to bear fruit (15:16) and to love one another (15:17). So there are at least three consequences of being named a friend of Jesus: you gain spiritual knowledge, you bear spiritual fruit, and you learn to love. These are the three main lessons in the school of love here on earth. Notice that there is both receiving and giving, receiving God’s love, and putting it into action.

Love and spiritual knowledge are what enable us to overcome the world, to not be distressed by the world, to not be controlled by the cynicism and selfishness that is so common in the world. That is what is meant by “conquering” the world. The external world ceases to dominate and determine our inner state, if we have the Spirit of Truth within us. As Jesus said “When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).

This Spirit guides our minds into truth, into spiritual knowledge. And with this guide, we gain the power to resist the world’s pressure. This is what John means when he says “this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith” (1 John 5:4).

Faith is a lived experience; it is not a list of dogmas or beliefs. It is the trusting personal relationship one has with God, with Jesus, and with the Spirit. Your faith is your walk with God, your lived experience with God. And your experience is unique. If you maintain that connection, you are not afraid of life any more. You are not dominated or intimidated by the world.

People with spiritual power and strength of conviction can go against their environment in remarkable ways. A German businessman named Oskar Schindler went against the prevailing anti-Semitism of the 1930s and 1940s, employing over a thousand Jews in his factories in Poland and Bohemia, and paying bribes to save their lives. So also did a Swedish diplomat named Raoul Wallenberg, who issued Swedish visas to many Hungarian Jews, helping them escape the Nazis. He was then arrested by the Soviets after the war, and kept in prison until his death. If Wallenberg could save people from the Nazis, maybe he would set about saving people from the Soviets, too, so they locked him up. It is hard to imagine the fierce anti-Semitic climate in Nazi-occupied regions, and how brave one had to be to go against the mob, though some had to pay a price for their opposition.

Jesus taught the apostles about God’s love for all of his children, even for the world. He entrusts us to bring God’s love into the world. That is our conquering effect, the ability to win people over to God’s love and away from the world’s materialism. Even one person with faith can change the world. So, receive God’s love, live in faith, and let the Son shine through you!