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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church

Series: Love: the Cure for Indifference
Why Should We Believe You?

1 John 5:9-13

If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

In preparing for the podcast portion of this week's Lutheran Basics -- here is, of course, a shameless plug for the little website/podcast/zoom faith formation project I've undertaken and which you, too, can peruse and participate in simply by typing stlconline.org/lutheranbasics into your browser bar -- anyway, in preparing for the podcast, I found and shared a story about the Lutheran scholar Martin Marty. Marty was interviewed once by Bill Moyers who asked Marty if he had been born again. When Marty told Moyers his baptism date, Moyers wondered if that was good enough for life. And Marty said, "Yes and no, you see I was also born again this morning." Marty was referring to the Lutheran belief that we remember our baptisms daily, that we daily die to sin and rise to newness of life. I've fielded that question before myself, whether or not I've been born again. And I find myself wondering, "Can't you tell?" The sad truth on too many days is probably not, but the real truth is also that the right and proper response to the love of God and grace of God given us in cross is that our love is the testimony—that our love is the evidence that we are heirs to eternal life.

When the Elder is writing to his community, he anticipates a big question, "Why should we believe you?" You may recall that this community is made up of people who believe in Jesus, but who have become embroiled in a debate about whether or not Jesus was fully human. So the Elder has laid out a case here for the full humanity of Jesus, and now, finally, in the last chapter, the Elder has come to the strongest point. Why should this community believe him? Well, he says, this truth about Jesus comes from God, the highest authority. I mean, it is a pretty cool stunt - can't argue with God, right? But he says more: here is the evidence: eternal life. And y'all have eternal life. And, in truth, the Elder has spent the entire letter - or sermon - or commentary - or whatever - this - has spent all of it holding up a mirror to the community as proof. "Why should we believe you?" they ask. Well, God...and you. God is in the flesh, and you are in the flesh. God

is love. And you love one another. God is life, and you have it, in abundance into the ages.

My former and beloved New Testament professor, Audrey West, who now occasionally teaches Greek at Moravian Seminary, notes that the words for eternal life - *zoe aiwnon* - don't necessarily mean lasting forever, though there is certainly that future promise there. But, she writes, "'Life' in this sense...has to do with a quality of existence that death cannot destroy. That is, it is 'eternal,' not in the sense of lasting forever, but in its quality, in its manifestation in the here and now." This isn't just about life that lasts forever and ever and ever, but about a kind of life that happens right here, right now. And, for 1 John, this quality of life is already in evidence in this community. Here's the proof the Elder has given: love for one another, 1 John 3:14; willingness to lay down one's life for one another, 1 John 3:16; sharing with those in need, 1 John 3:17; obeying the commands of Jesus to love one another - which comes up several times. And more, walking as Jesus walked, 1 John 2:6, and loving as God loved, 1 John 4.

Why should the Elder's community believe him? Their love is all the evidence they need. Love took on flesh in Christ. They, who are flesh, love. As simple as that.

And so, beloved we come to the big question of our day. The world asks us, "Why should we believe you?"

And, beloved, there are days where I think it would be easier to just give the world all the reasons why they should *not* believe me. Chief among them, I think, is the Church's indifference to one another and to those God's love, especially the poor and the marginalized.

Why should the world believe us, beloved, when so many congregations darn near went to war over closing for COVID-19, wearing masks, social distancing, and getting vaccinated?! Why should the world believe us when so many wish to claim our country as a Christian one, but we hoard vaccines? Why should the world believe a bunch of bystanders while the poor and marginalized are trampled upon, the refugee and alien flee for their lives, while powerful countries obliterate weak ones for scarce resources that pollute our air and land and waterways?

Enough of that. There will always be a thousand, million such reasons - all of them probably right and true. We are all but beggars at the throne of God, this is true.¹

But beloved, we can't buckle down and turn the world's question, "why should we believe you," into a debate to be won, a battle to the death. We will not survive it. And thanks be to God. Because perhaps it is only once we die to those lies - to any belief that we can have it all together, to any belief in our moral superiority or in our logical prowess

¹ This is a paraphrase of Martin Luther's final words and some other words he was known to say.

to any believe that it is our righteousness, or rule-abiding that saves us— Perhaps it is only once we die to those lies, that may we rise to eternal life and be the love in the flesh we were baptized to be.

And that is it, beloved, the only answer that will ever really matter. The world asks, “Why should we believe you?” Our love is all the evidence they need. Love took on flesh in Christ. We, who are flesh, love. As simple as that.

Amen.