



The Trinity Pulpit



Unfinished Business Acts 1 John 3:1-10

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In the 2008 presidential campaign, the “bridge to nowhere” became a part of our nation’s conversation and a phrase used to describe useless government projects. However, Alaska’s “Bridge to Nowhere” is at the end of a beautiful stretch of road that just ends, which is now called the “Road to Nowhere.” You can believe what you want about the “Bridge to Nowhere”, but the “Road to Nowhere” is a sad commentary. The road that looks promising and just ends without a destination or purpose reminds us of all the unfinished parts of our lives.

There is nothing sadder than to see something that is incomplete or unfinished; e.g., a building project, whether a home or a commercial property, that gets halfway constructed, then the resources run dry and it is left in its unfinished state. In our present economy, there is a growing problem with unfinished houses; in the Triangle, there are neighborhoods that are living with rows of unfinished homes.

I have been to many homes after the death of a loved one only to discover unfinished business. It might be papers on a desk, work in a basement, or relationships left in limbo. Whatever the case, unfinished business is something that can haunt us all. For many of us, the thought of living with things unfinished can bring stress. There are some folks that just can’t go to bed at night unless everything is just so. It seems that these folks are usually married to a spouse who is very comfortable with things unfinished and incomplete. Of course, that creates more stress. What are we to do with unfinished business?

Here in 1 John 3:2, John wrote about the unfinished business of being a child of God: “What we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” Can you hear the sense of unfin-

ished business in John’s words? What we will be we do not know; what we will ultimately become is yet to be revealed. Yet, instead of it causing John stress, his comfort came from trusting God. John reminds us that we don’t know what we will be, but we do know Jesus; because we know and



can trust Jesus, we will one day be complete. What are we to do in this time as we wait for our completion in Christ Jesus? What are we to do as unfinished business? Let me share with you three things we can know as we live as the unfinished business of God.

First, we may be unfinished but we are still something. John reminds us of who we are: we are called the children of God! We might not be finished but we are the children of God. There are some important words in verse 1 that I want us to explore. First, there is this proclamation: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.”

There are three terms in this statement which need our attention so we can understand that we may not be complete, but we are still something. The first phrase has to do with attention. The phrase “how great the Father’s love for us” has lost something in transition. There is an imperative in the Greek that is not translated in the NIV, but the New American Standard Bible translates it correctly when it states “see or behold how great the Father’s love is.” The idea is for us as believers to give attention. The second phrase is “how great.” The term is only used seven times in the Bible, and in each usage, the result of the term is for one to stand amazed. The verse literally states “for us to behold and be amazed and give attention to the great love of God.”

The second term that is found in the words “how great” actually first meant “of another world.”

Have you ever seen something which appeared so odd that you said to yourself “It is not of this world?” If you have ever flown in a plane over the desert of the southwest and you have grown up in the southeast, then you look at miles and miles of desert terrain with its changing colors and depths and say “This looks otherworldly.” Or maybe it is a view from atop a mountain range which you have previously not experienced, so you stand amazed and say “This is beyond my experience. It is of another world.”

That is John’s terminology in 1 John as he strove to describe the love of God. He was saying “Pay attention, wake up. Behold, see this love of God. This love is so undeserved, so unexpected, so amazing that it is not of this world.” In essence, he was right. The love of God is not of this world; it is not the kind of love we usually show or experience. The love of God is selfless, without merit, and without our earning. So, John said “Behold, the love of God.”

The third term is also important – this love has been “lavished upon us.” The phrase means “to have love poured upon us as to cover us and to leave us in the permanent state of being loved.” God has taken the initiative to love us and we are permanently and forever loved by God. So much so, that we should be called the children of God and that is what we are.

John’s first statement in this passage is that we might not be complete, but we are loved by God and we are the children of God. There is a subtle wording in 1 John that we need to address. God’s initiative of love toward us that is upon all people is amazing. God has lavished his love upon us in such a manner that we did not earn it and could not earn it. The purpose of this initiative of love is that we should be called the children of God. John then said “That is what we are.”

That we should be called children of God is God’s initiative. “That is what we are,” is our response. In many ways, everyone who lives is a child of God, for God has lavished his love upon everyone who lives. His amazing love is for everyone, that we all should be called the children of God. However, not everyone is actually a child of God. John concludes that through our response that is not what we are simply called, but it is who we actually are.

William Barclay helps us with the understanding of this passage. He reminds us that there is a difference between paternity and fatherhood. He suggests that the first phrase is about paternity: the facts that God is creator and the God of all things has loved us all are acts of paternity. There is a relationship with God for all people, so they can claim to be children of God. But there

is also a difference between biological paternity and fatherhood. Fatherhood implies love that is returned, relationship, and intimacy. When we come into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, then relationship assures what God has initiated in love. We should be called the children of God; we are the children of God. God’s initiative of love and our response reminds us that we are children of God.

No matter what your life might look like at this moment, you and I need to be reminded that we are children of God. God loves us. There is nothing that can happen to us or nothing that we can do that can change the fact that God loves us. He has lavished this otherworld love on us. We might not be all we can be, but we are not nothing. We are something or rather someone. We are a child of God. That is who we are.

A second truth which John reminds us about ourselves being unfinished business is that we are not who we are going to be but we are not who we were. We are in process. John wrote, “What we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” We don’t know what we are going to be, but we know we are not what we used to be. That is the testimony of the Christian. The Christian is not the one who is perfect, but the Christian is the one who is being perfected.

John described this process in three ways. First, we must purify ourselves. John wrote that the person who realizes that they have not arrived will participate in purifying his or herself. The word purify is written in a tense that means “constant and continual action.” The idea is that as Christians we have embraced the never-ending journey toward Christ-likeness that will not end in this life. The Christian realizes that he is not what he once was, but he is now in the process of becoming like Jesus. This process of purification is something that we have to choose. God is at work in our lives, but the phrase is that we purify ourselves. This does not suggest that we can somehow earn our salvation; it suggests that by our own choosing, we will participate with God in being transformed into the likeness of Jesus. The same concept is found when we are told to work out our salvation in trembling and fear. We must come to the spiritual place where we choose to participate with God in our lives. We must recognize that we are in process.

To do this, we must recognize two things: conviction and God’s holiness. First, we need to recognize the importance of conviction in our lives. Conviction of sin is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is conviction in



our lives which reminds us that a thought or activity is not Christ-like. This conviction of the Holy Spirit helps us recognize the areas of our lives that need to be changed. John addressed this in these verses which discuss how the Christian cannot go on sinning. When we first read this passage, we want to tell John “This is impossible. There is no way that I can stop sinning. If not sinning is a sign of being a Christian, then I am doomed, or at least I am not really a Christian.” John wrote in verse 6, “No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.” That seems to leave us all out of the picture of knowing God. However, to understand this passage we must understand the context of John’s epistle.

John wrote this epistle in a time when Gnosticism was a predominant threat to Christian thinking and living. One of the great tenants of Gnosticism, especially the Christian Gnostics, was that one could do what they wanted to with their bodies; because the body and spirit were completely separate. There was a sense in Gnosticism that you could sin as you pleased because as long as you believed the right thing spiritually, then what you did physically really did not matter. So John was right – the one who knows God does not go on sinning.

John was not talking about the struggle that Paul described of trying and failing when it came to sin. John was talking about the belief that sin in the Christian’s life does not matter. He was addressing this casual view of sin that the Gnostic Christians had. He is saying that when one comes to know God one doesn’t just go on like nothing ever happened. If you continue to sin like you did before you knew Christ, or like you do not know Christ, then you probably do not know Christ. That was John’s point. John was saying that the Christian lives with a sense of conviction. It is not that we do not sin, of course we do; however, the Christian lives with the conviction of sin which reminds us of what sin is and what it is not. When you and I as Christians lose our sense of conviction in regards to sin and begin to sin like there is no connection between what we confess to believe and the way we live, then we are treading in dangerous waters.

What does this look like in our culture? Some statistics are bothersome. In regards to pre-marital sex, there is little, if any, difference between those who say they are believers in Christ and those who are not. In re-

gards to divorce in America, some of the highest rates of divorce occur in populations that are supposedly evangelical and conservative.

In a recent article about young evangelicals that appeared in the *Civate*, a publication of Houston Baptist University, Matthew Anderson suggested that there is a great shift in the evangelical movement amongst young adults. This is seen in the shift politically as young evangelicals are more interested in social issues instead of traditional moral issues. Also, there has been a shift in the younger evangelicals’ political affiliations. Once soundly in the Republican Party, young evangelicals are now to be found in both parties and no party at all. In addition, there is what Anderson described as libertarianism in their approach to their faith. Listen to this paragraph from his article:

For most young evangelicals, the flash points where our libertarianism comes out are traditional sources of conflict with parents: tattoos, alcohol, music, movies, language and sexuality. In each area, younger evangelicals have rejected the perceived prudishness symbolized by our parents (yes, ironically, the children of the sixties and seventies) in favor of engaging the culture around us. Often this reflects a new internalization—one might characterize it as a gnosticization—of the

Gospel. Social rules, such as those which once governed alcohol consumption among evangelicals, language, and sexual behavior, are now a sign of a Puritanical legalism that has forgotten that Jesus really cares about the heart and our intentions, not our behaviors and, as such, are to be discarded.

This is an interesting choice of words by Anderson. He suggested that the new lifestyles of the younger evangelicals are what Paul would call libertine and John would call Gnosticism. The disconnection of belief and actions is what a Gnostic, whether ancient or current, does not want to deal with – conviction.

John said that someone who knows God is in transformation and cannot simply continue in life like they do not know God. There must be a change in behavior to match the change in heart.

There is another quality of Christians being unfinished business: comparison. Sometimes the reason we do not recognize sin is that we are comparing ourselves to the



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wrong standard. John wrote that we are to purify ourselves as Jesus Christ is pure. The standard for our living is not others but Christ himself. If we keep our eyes on others, then our lives might not seem as though there needs to be improvement; however, if we keep our eyes on Christ, then we will daily realize that change needs to come and we are in the process of becoming something more than we have been and are at this moment.

The story is told by a preacher of riding a train one day through the countryside of England. As he traveled through the rural areas, there were many whitewashed houses against the green countryside. The sun was shining and the houses gleamed in the sun. They looked so white that the reflection seemed as though it would blind him. The preacher noticed how white and clean they looked against the terrain that surrounded them. Yet, a few days later, as he traveled back home, he had a different experience. It had snowed the night before, and the beautiful, white snowfall had blanketed the ground and countryside. Now, as he gazed upon those same whitewashed houses, they looked so dingy and dirty. Next to the freshly fallen snow, they no longer looked white and clean but dirty and filthy. He concluded it is all what you are comparing the houses to that makes a difference. When compared to the things of earth, they looked so clean, but when contrasted with the fresh snow of heaven, they looked filthy.

We need conviction in our lives to recognize sin as sin, but we also need the right comparison in our lives. Our lives can sometimes look pretty good compared to the lives of those around us. We might compare ourselves to other believers and even to non-believers and say “I

am not that bad. In fact, I do pretty well.” But if we get a glimpse of our lives compared to the life of Jesus, then we understand why the Bible says that there is no one righteous, not even one. Our righteousness is like a filthy rag.

We are not who we used to be, and we are not who we are going to be. The Christian is always in the process of becoming like Jesus.

John also reminds us that one day we will be the finished business of God. John tells us that what we are going to be is yet to be revealed, but this we know: when we see him we will be like him. Notice that John still does not describe exactly what we will be because what we will exactly be is not important. For John, it was a matter of faith – we will be like Jesus. This is the great statement of faith in this passage. John does not have all the answers, but this he knows as a deep conviction: one day, whether it is Jesus coming again or Jesus calling us home through death, we are going to see him. We are going to behold him and when we do, in that moment, we will be changed. We will see him and we will be like him. We will be finished business.

Until then, we are unfinished business. So John reminds us that while we might be unfinished, we are still loved by God and we are his children. We belong to him. We are called by his name. We are in process. The Christian needs to be able to know that he may not be what he is going to be, but he is not what he has been. Through keeping our eyes on Jesus and the conviction of the Holy Spirit, we are being made into the likeness of Jesus. While we are unfinished, we keep the faith that one day we shall see him; in that moment, love’s redeeming work will be complete in our lives. ❁

