

Human beings are endlessly inventive, and usually that's a good thing. But our skill at inventing new ways to divide ourselves against each other is both astonishing, and kind of sad. We create antagonistic divisions based on pretty much anything, even things we did not choose and cannot change; we escalate differences of opinion into bitter hatred. And for what? One wonders what we might accomplish if only we channeled this immense energy into something beautiful, or useful.

For the first generation of Christians, the big division was between Judaism and paganism, and at least there's a meaningful difference between the two. Since the very first followers of Jesus were Jewish, some in that generation assumed that one had to be Jewish in order to be Christian. And within that faction, some insisted quite vigorously, because humans will be humans.

Fortunately, God will be God. And today's readings are all about how God overcame that meaningful difference and went on to make it abundantly clear that the Jesus Movement is open to everyone, without factions dividing us against each other. God worked through good leaders who had earned credibility through their own intense discipleship, leaders who left no doubt that following God was the most important thing in their lives, far more important than any division or faction.

The story from Acts lays out these principles by basically retelling the Pentecost story, except this time, "the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out... on the Gentiles," which seems natural to us, but was a profound shift at the time. The Church then responded to God's grace by baptizing those whom God had already welcomed in. The great division was erased. And the newly baptized, in turn, began their life in the church by their own response of grace, in their case, hospitality. That's the way it's supposed to work.

Today's passage from the First Letter of John takes us from God overcoming one division to how God empowers us to overcome every division. John makes the point so simply that it bears a bit of amplification. While there are always people who would impose restrictions on God's love, and conditions on being in relationship with God, Saint John wrote unambiguously, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God." "Everyone." And in the same breath, John pointed out that believers are "born of God" *first*. That is, God acts first, establishing a relationship as permanent as the relationship between mother and child. As a result of this relationship, we are able not only to believe in Jesus, and worship him, but to engage with him as friends. So no one has the authority to place limitations or restrictions on peoples' relationships with God, nor to create divisions in the Church, which God intends to be unified.

Just because our faith comes as a result of God's action doesn't diminish the power of faith. Saint John writes of the power of faith, again using simple language that bears unpacking. John talks about conquering the world, but it's critical for us to understand that this is not a military conquest. First of all, the world already belongs to God, as do we, so God doesn't need us to fight literal wars on God's behalf. All wars are

inherently secular affairs, even if some have found it expedient to give them a religious theme or justification.

Remember also that when Saint John talks about “the world,” he usually doesn’t mean geographical territory. Rather, “the world” can serve as shorthand for the rebellion of creation against God. In the next chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus says to the disciples, “In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” But I prefer the King James rendering, “I have overcome the world.” Again, this is not about violence. Most of the time, entities that oppose God don’t need to work that hard. They only have to distract us from God, or divide us against ourselves, and human nature makes those things easy for them. We are tragically quick to embrace ephemeral pleasures, petty conflicts, and manufactured outrages.

Unless, of course, we choose to put God first in our lives. That’s how John portrays Jesus as defining what it means to be one of his disciples. Our translation of John’s gospel reads, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” But the Greek conveys the idea that everything Jesus taught is the commandment. So to follow “the commandment” is really to follow everything Jesus taught by word and action — in other words, to transform our whole lives and live in mutual love.

While a lot of good sermons have been preached about the profundity and implications of a command to love, if you think about it, it would be rather strange for anyone — even God — to command someone to love anyone else, or anything. Especially God, since our entire understanding of our sacred story is that rather than forcing us to live or to feel a certain way, God has been trying to win us over, calling us back into loving relationship but never coercing us.

And it just makes more sense to me that Jesus would define discipleship as a complete conversion of life, rather than a feeling, or even the fruits of living his way. Feelings and fruits are great, but it seems unlikely that they could set us free from all the powers and temptations of the world.

By the same token, many Christians are taught that being Jesus’s friend is the most important thing we should strive for, and that’s not wrong, but we usually assume that means being Jesus’s friend means having warm feelings toward Jesus. But the Gospel rules out that assumption. “You are my friends,” Jesus says, “if you do what I command you.” And, “You did not choose me but I chose you.” Yes, Jesus does love us no matter what, but we become his disciples when we respond faithfully to his loving call.

Then we are truly free, for we can see the temptations of the world for what they are. Once we can compare their superficial allure to the deep joys of true discipleship and holy union, the distractions of the world will hold no power over us. No one will be able to divide us against each other, for our identity will be founded on being united in Christ, and with Christ. Then we will put our energy to the best possible use, devoting

our great powers of creativity and invention to build up God's kingdom on Earth. United in Christ, our lives will bear fruit worthy of our potential, his joy will be in us, and our joy will be complete.