

We continue our look today at the eyewitnesses to Easter with the one of the original twelve disciples, John. In some ways his story overlaps quite a bit with Peter's. If you made the gospel accounts into a movie John would always share the screen with Peter, but Peter always has more speaking parts. However, at the end of their lives it's John who said more words because John wrote a considerable amount of the New Testament. Church tradition says that the book of John, the letters of 1st, 2nd and 3rd John, and the book of Revelation were all written by the same disciple and that's the John we're talking about this morning. His writings share lots of common themes, but one of the most prevalent is how much John talks about love. In fact, in the Gospel of John he uses the word love around 57 times – that's more than Matthew, Mark, and Luke combined, and in the 5 chapters that make up his letter we know as 1 John he uses the word love almost 50 times. He became something of an expert on the topic. My head is swimming these days with school work and research topics so as I've thought about John this week I've decided that his dissertation would have been on love and his project on how a follower of Christ receives that love and then puts it into action. But, love wasn't always the word that would have been used to define John. He'd been defined in lots of other ways first.

John was impulsive.

Impulse control was not something John originally had. I sympathize with this quite a bit. John had a thought and he told you. John had an idea and he acted on it. This was both an incredible quality and a weakness that he had to work on.

We first meet John while he was at work. John and his brother James were fishermen along with Peter and his brother Andrew. They were ordinary guys who were being faithful to work hard and provide for their families. When Jesus walks by them John and James were on the Sea of Galilee in a boat with their father, more on him later, preparing their nets.

“Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.” Matthew 4:22 Obedience or poor impulse control? Either way this is what I love about John – immediately he responds. Doesn't think about it, doesn't ask any questions, doesn't give notice to his father, doesn't leave a forwarding address. Jesus called, John answered. He's impulsive but being impulsive is not always a bad thing. It can be a great personality trait!

The flip side of this is seen later when John is walking with Jesus and the other disciples through what he would consider enemy territory. There was no love lost between the Samaritans and the Jews and John was no exception. He'd grown up his whole life learning to hate them. We all grow up learning to fear or hate a group that doesn't look like us or worship like us or act like us. John did too. So they make their way to Samaria and they sent some messengers on ahead to announce that Jesus would be in the area soon. They went to set up the tent for the crusade. But, when word got out that Jesus was actually on his way to Jerusalem and was just passing through the Samaritans weren't too interested. Luke says, **"The people there did not welcome him...When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?'"**

Luke 9:53-54 Impulsive. John did not think that through. Oh, yeah, they're not gonna welcome Jesus who came to love all the people – fine we'll call down fire and destroy you right now. Wait for it, wait for it. Ok. I heard it when I said it. **"But Jesus turned and rebuked them and they went to another village."** **Luke 9:55-56**

John's personality was to be a bit impulsive. But, our personality traits don't have to define who we are nor do they limit our usefulness in God's kingdom. John's impulsive yes to Jesus that day on the Sea of Galilee set him up for the greatest adventure of his life, but equally his impulsiveness when not submitted to the Lordship of Christ could have destroyed their testimony to the very people Jesus had come to save. Our personality does not have to fully define us either, for our greatest strengths may also be our greatest weaknesses, yet when given to the Lord and placed in His hand it may reveal the very reason why God created you with those traits in the first place.

John was impulsive.

John was rough around the edges.

Remember, John was a fisherman. He's strong and brash and was willing to work hard for what he wanted in life. He saw things in a very black and white manner – no gray with John. There's right and there's wrong and there's no in between. He was a little legalistic as a result. In Mark 9 we have this conversation between John and Jesus, **"Teacher,' said John, 'we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.' 'Do not stop him,' Jesus said...'for whoever is not against us is for us.'" Mark 9:38-40** In John's clear cut world random strangers cannot do the work of the

Lord – only the people they know. The people who are doing it the same way as them. Jesus corrects John’s understanding and teaches him an essential lesson about who is important, who matters, and who can be part of God’s kingdom. Because just before John asked this question there had been an argument about who was the greatest disciple. Jesus said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” Then he’d bought a child to stand among them and while holding him in His arms said if you aren’t welcoming children then you’re not welcoming me. To this John had said – but what about people we don’t know casting out demons in your name. Jesus corrected him and then continued on teaching John and the others not to put up road blocks between people and Jesus.

Those rough edges meant that John is also the one who says out loud what everyone else is thinking. (John and I have gotten along really well all week!) Again, Peter is usually the one known for putting his foot in his mouth. John doesn’t make the same sort of blunders. They all just know they can get John to ask the good questions or to say what they want him to say. In fairness, in the conversation we just looked at, John said “we” told the man “we” didn’t know to stop. He’s just the one they got to say it out loud. And, James wanted to call down fire in Samaria too he just got John to say it. We’ve already seen last week this scene at the last supper where John is sitting next to Jesus when He announces that one of the disciples is going to betray him. Peter gets John’s attention and says – ask him, do it. So, John leans over to Jesus and asks what everyone is wondering – who is it? Impulsive, a tad bit immature and a little rough around the edges.

But, the thing about rough edges is that it gave Jesus something to work on. There was still plenty of raw material for Jesus to mold and shape into His image. Because it was to this fire-calling, no tolerance, rough and tough fisherman that Jesus entrusted the care of His mother to from the cross. **“Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother...When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple who he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Dear woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” John 19:25-27** Those rough edges didn’t continue to define John because his life had changed after he’d spent time with Jesus. He’d learned how to care about others, how to see them as Jesus did. The rough edges had been smoothed by Jesus.

John was impulsive.

John was rough around the edges.

John was known by many names and relationships.

We are first introduced to John as the son of Zebedee. John and his brother James are defined by their father's identity. I can relate. All my life – this is our pastor's daughter – my name is Sarah. I remember when I first went out as a missionary and was calling pastors for support and to book services. I'd give my name and explanation of what I was doing and left countless messages. Until finally I swallowed my pride and started saying – I'm Phil Taylor's daughter. A piece of me would die each time, but I'd be put through to the pastor. John's father was also a fisherman and seemed to have built a business of some means. We gather this information from Mark telling us that when Jesus called John and James they were in the boat with their father and when they left to follow Jesus the hired men stayed with Zebedee and the boat. It implies that they had a successful enough business to employ many people. Perhaps the company was Zebedee and Sons for they were certainly known by who their father was.

John is also almost always seen with his brother, James. In fact, it's James who Jesus calls out to first and who gets top billing because when you list the inner circle of disciples or the three who were in the sailboat you're always going to say – Peter, James and John. James always gets listed before John – maybe he's older, maybe it's just alphabetical order or maybe John lived in James' shadow.

James and John also receive quite a nickname from Jesus. When Mark lists those Jesus had appointed as His twelve disciples we're told about James son of Zebedee and his brother John and to them Jesus gave the name which meant Sons of Thunder. Thunder is big and loud and a bit scary. It makes me wonder why they were given such a name. Daniel Darling says this was an unflattering nickname and then writes, "Normally, the names Jesus gave meant something profound, a kind of window into someone's future. But with John, this new moniker was a window into his present. It was a not-so-subtle reminder of John's least desirable traits: hot temper and a tendency toward hard legalism." Don't you hate when you get a nickname that sticks for the next 2,000 years when you sorta wished everyone would have never started using in the first place? Nicknames are hard to shake even when they cease to define who we are.

John's mother also makes an appearance in the Gospel accounts. Salome is her name and she also appears at the cross during Jesus crucifixion and arrives at the tomb on that Easter morning. But, she's most known for her request of Jesus on behalf of her sons. She's the original helicopter mom. **"Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." Matthew 20:20-21** Salome had no idea what she was asking and Jesus said as much to her in response. When the rest of the disciples heard that John and James had had their mother there asking favors of Jesus they were indignant and it's what started that argument I referenced earlier about who was the greatest. But, it also gave Jesus an opportunity to speak to them about suffering and servanthood instead of power and prestige. John's mother had plans for her sons, but in that moment she was forced to surrender her children to the plans the Lord had for them.

Everyone knew John's father, his mother was a tad overbearing, his brother got top billing, he was given a nickname for being loud, but there was one other name and relationship that came to define John more than all the others.

The disciples had all gathered with Jesus in an upper room to observe the Passover – it's the meal we now always refer to as the last supper because it's the final meal before Jesus is arrested and crucified. At that meal John is seated next to Jesus and describes himself for the first of 5 times as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." When you have been defined by the love of Jesus nothing else matters. When your identity is found in your relationship with Jesus you can let go of all else.

Who your father is, who your mother was, the choices of your siblings or spouse, the words that have been said over you – you're too much, you're not enough, you don't matter, who do you think you are? You're the one Jesus loves and He has a place at His table right next to Him for you to sit. And, so John later writes, **"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God." 1 John 3:1**

John was impulsive.

John was rough around the edges.

John was known by many names and relationships.

John was transformed by love.

Sitting at that table beside Jesus John had witnessed Jesus wash their feet. Jesus had then identified his betrayer and Judas had left. When he was gone Jesus began to speak. It was His final set of lessons, His last words to His disciples and He says, **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:34-35** This command John truly took to heart and from that moment began to live out. It’s not a coincidence that moments before John had realized he was loved by Jesus and then heard these words. Knowing you are loved by God is what enables you to love others. No longer is John looking to call down fire on enemies instead he begins a campaign to make sure we all know what it is to love each other. So later John will write something that now sounds familiar, **“I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.” 2 John 1:5-6** For John obedience and love are the two sides of the same coin. Truly the words of Jesus took root in his life and he lived them out from that time forward. This is what an encounter with Jesus does – it changes the way we act and live. The way we treat others, speak of people and to people. An encounter with Jesus changes our lives.

John was an eyewitness to the greatest act of love. In the Gospel of John we get his account of what happened on Good Friday and Easter, but in his letters we get his own words on what took place that weekend. **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” 1 John 3:16**

Jesus “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” 1 John 2:2

“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” 1 John 4:9-11

This is the love in action John witnessed standing at the foot of the cross. The One who loved Him so fully, so completely, died for Him. Jesus was the atoning sacrifice meaning His death in every way made amends or repaired the broken relationship between God and

man. It means that because Jesus died in our place we can live in a right relationship with God.

This is the love John witnessed as he outran Peter to the tomb and found it empty. This is the love that transformed John's life and this is the love that John lived in response to by the way he treated others. Having been transformed by the love of God through Jesus John then instructs us to put this into action in our lives. **"Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did."** 1 John 2:6

"And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us." 1 John 3:23-24

And, then John further explains this command to love one another by telling us, **"We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."** 1 John 4:19-21

Having been transformed by the love of God we must now love our brothers and sisters. It really doesn't get any plainer than that. Quit picking fights with your brothers and sisters who don't like broccoli. If you love God then show love to your brothers and sisters.

Otherwise you stand guilty of breaking the command of scripture – thou shalt not lie.

John was an eyewitness to Easter, but we also have been an eyewitness to Jesus death and resurrection. We too have experienced His transforming love, and if you haven't you can today. We read it a moment ago – follow His command to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ. It's also in 1 John that we read, **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."** 1 John 1:9 You can know the forgiveness and love of Jesus today.

But, for those of us who have already begun to walk with Jesus can I ask us to reflect for a moment on the second part of that command – the one that came after believing – **"And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us."** 1 John 3:23 *(can you leave 1 John 1:9 on the screen and put this verse back up too? Have them both on the same screen is my point!)*

how are we doing loving others? Have we allowed the love of Jesus for us transform us so that we love others the way He loved us?

And, lastly this morning hear the good news that John's life demonstrates for us all today – the love that Jesus has for you is what defines you. You are a child of God – deeply loved by the Father. He has poured out that love for you through the death of His Son. Jesus loves you. Don't let your personality, your past, your relationships, or anything else define you. Find your identity in Christ and let His love transform you this morning. Oh, how He loves us. Oh, how He loves you. We are loved by Him.

Let's pray.