

“What Conquers the World”
May 9, 2021
Scripture: I John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

What does it mean to “conquer the world” in the context of faith in Christ? There’s an old legend that says when the Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity in the first part of the 4th century he had a vision of a cross in the heavens and heard the words, “In this sign, conquer.” That’s the claim, anyway. Constantine harnessed the growing power of Christianity in his empire and domesticated it, going on to further expand the borders of the empire and bring rebellious regions under his control. He didn’t do that through acts of compassion and sacrifice. He did it through violence.

So, it might be worthwhile to explore a little bit what the writer of First John might mean by those words, “whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.” The Christian movement arose in a world that was ruled with an iron fist by Rome. Any talk of conquering the world would have been understood in that context. The only example people had was the violence and coercion of Rome. So, an alternative vision of conquering that was rooted in compassion and justice might have been seen as undermining the social order.

We know from Paul’s letters that the communities that formed in response to Jesus’ teachings were diverse and deliberately refused to recognize the social stratifications of that time. And we know, from what we find in First John and other letters, that they rejected the idea of Caesar as ultimate authority in their lives. So, it’s a safe assumption that they understood how earth-shattering their message was. For the first time, possibly ever, a religious movement was promoting not just a sectarian form of justice rooted in compassion but a universal one. The early Christians didn’t arrive at that place by accident. In many ways they understood Jesus as the embodiment of the prophet Isaiah’s words bringing a message of good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind, as we can find in Luke’s gospel. And even if we acknowledge that John’s gospel is very different from Luke’s that message is still pervasive. Jesus serves and heals and even restores life to the dead in John’s portrayal as much as in Luke’s.

So, what conquers the world is justice established through humility and compassion, or what the writer of this letter calls love. But because it can conquer, the world resists it. Roman society resisted this movement, imprisoning people like Paul or much later persecuting and even executing Christians when they challenged the social order too much. I have a book of poetry, written by Guatemalan poet Julia Esquivel, titled *Threatened with Resurrection*. Esquivel was an educator, theologian and human rights activist in Guatemala at a time when that was very dangerous. In 1980 her activism forced her to go into exile in Switzerland following death threats for speaking out on behalf of the indigenous population. From there she continued to speak and publish and advocate across Europe and North America for the Maya and Quiche populations. She died in 2019 at the age of 89 in Guatemala City.

Her poem “They Have Threatened Us with Resurrection” speaks of the power of resurrection to overcome the evils committed against the people of Guatemala. The powers that

be could not kill the hope that lives within a people who put their faith in the promise of resurrection. Resurrection hope, revealed in the growth and survival of John's beloved community of faith is what motivates a woman like Julia Esquivel to hold onto hope even when she's forced to leave her home under threat of death.

It's that same faith that walked with a group of activists in Alabama 56 years ago across the Edmund Pettus Bridge between Selma and Montgomery. They were marching to demand access to voter registration so Black people could freely participate in the electoral process. But they weren't going to take what was theirs by coercion or violence. They were committed to non-violent resistance. And when they met the army of state troopers on the bridge, they knelt to pray but refused to yield. The state of Alabama brought its might to bear against that movement with violence, thinking violence would conquer. But the marchers stood firm and accepted the blows of the clubs and the attacks of the dogs, conquering the world with their faith.

When Jesus issued his commandment to love one another, he wasn't speaking academically. In fact, he'd just shown his disciples what he meant by washing their feet. He washed all their feet, even Peter who would deny him; even Judas who would betray him. Jesus refuses to discriminate when it comes to compassion. He refuses to define the world by its worst elements, to define us by our lowest acts. And he will not resort to violence and coercion to conquer. In John's version of Jesus' passion there's a scene we often overlook. When Jesus is brought before Pilate, the representative of Roman power, Pilate asks, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answers, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over." He won't let himself be drawn into identifying with our violence and fear. In fact he tells his followers in that upper room they should have no fear by assuring them, "I have conquered the world."

He conquers the world through compassion; conquers it through the power of love. By putting our trust in him, our faith in Jesus and his commandment to love, we become conquerors of the world. When we refuse to accept a world where coercion and violence is used to force compliance, when we stand with victims of tyranny and exploitation, when we see the humanity of our enemies and move toward them with compassion, we conquer the world.

For the writer of First John believing is more than just agreeing that something is real or true. It means acting in response to its influence on our lives. So, when we read, "Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the son of God," what's implied is those who believe will now behave in ways that reveal Jesus' identity. By living like him, by imitating his love and compassion, we offer the world an alternative power, power that transforms from within rather than coercing an outward conformity. In an article for the New Yorker in 1962, author and activist James Baldwin reflected on the importance of his faith to shaping his behavior. He wrote, "What was the point, the purpose of my salvation if it did not permit me to behave with love toward others, no matter how they behaved toward me?" What conquers the world begins by conquering our selves.

We're called to turn our selves over to Christ and be made anew in his image. That's not only a spiritual exercise. It's a discipline meant to shape our behavior every day. We learn how to love by practicing love in the manner Jesus taught his disciples, indiscriminate and selfless.

When we do that the self we harbor within us, with all its pettiness and vindictiveness and fears will be conquered. We will no longer belong to the world. And little by little, through each relationship of love, each act of compassion, the world will be conquered through us.

Amen