

The Beloved Disciple

A sermon for the Season of Lent

Today we're going to look at the Beloved Disciple.

Lutherans are those who take the Bible seriously. As Cromwell said when a painter was painting his portrait: "Paint warts and all." We take the Scripture as it is, and we still take it seriously. It would be easy to say: "Look at all the difficulties," and walk away. We take it seriously and ask: "What do we do with it?"

With that comes the matter of tradition. We know the famous song from the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, in which Tevya stands on the roof and sings: "Tradition! Tradition!"

There's an old preacher's story about the young woman who's learning how to bake the Sunday roast. Her mother says: "First you have to cut this piece off the end. And then you put it in the pan in the oven." Her daughter asks: "Why do you cut it off?" Her mother says: "That's what my mother taught me." The daughter then went to her grandmother and asked: "Why do you cut the end off?" And her grandmother said: "That's what my mother taught me." The granddaughter went to her great grandmother and asked: "Why?" And the great grandmother said: "Because we only had a pan that size. That's why it was cut that way." Tradition!

And "traditions." We are bound by certain traditions. We ask: "Do we always have to do it this way?" "How do we criticize them?" For example, the Roman Catholic Pope has promulgated two dogmas about Mary (1854: The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, and 1950: The Dogma of the Bodily Assumption of Mary). These dogmas are binding for Roman Catholics, yet they are not in Scripture or the earliest tradition. What do we say about that?

There are things we want to know, such as: Did the Apostle John write the Gospel of John? What if that is not the way it is? Some will say: "Do not ask things like that. It is destructive. Let us just be simple."

When someone says: "Let us be simple," you want to watch your wallet. It is a way of saying we want things to be simple when they are not simple. On the other hand, we have to be sure that we are not throwing the baby out with the bath water.

The Apostle John. Knowing that Scripture is not as simple as we may have supposed, let us look at the Apostle John. In the New Testament there are nine

people named "John." The John who is one of the Twelve is usually paired together with James, his brother, and because of the way they are listed, we assume John is younger. These two, as well as Peter and some others, were fishermen.

We know from the story in Luke 5:1-11 that they were from Galilee, near Capernaum. They did very well because it says they had servants. Jesus had a nickname for them: "the sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). This probably meant that they were quick-tempered, impetuous, outspoken. Peter, James, and John appear together in several accounts: The healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-34), the raising of the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:49-56), the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-3), with Jesus' when he spoke at the Mount of Olives about signs of the end (Mark 13:3), and then in the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-28). They seem to be leaders among the Twelve.

The Gospels also talk about John alone. In Mark 9:38 John tells someone who was not a follower of Jesus and was casting out demons, to stop. He reports this to Jesus and Jesus scolds him, saying: "Don't forbid him." And: "He who is not against us is for us."

In Mark 10:35-37 James and John ask Jesus: "When you come into your kingdom, could we be first?" They were scolded again.

In the Book of Acts John is paired with Peter and appears in chapters 3, 4, and 8.

In Galatians 2:9 Paul mentions John being in Jerusalem. But later tradition says he went to Ephesus. He lived a long life. Revelation 1:9 says that he went to the Island of Patmos. We have to be careful here. It does not say "the Apostle John." In the Second and Third Letters of John the author speaks of himself as "the Elder." But he, referred to as "John the Elder," is not necessarily John the Apostle.

Could John the Apostle have written the Gospel of John? It seems unlikely for two huge reasons. The first reason is in the Mark 10:38 when James and John ask to be first, Jesus says: "You do not know what you are asking." In other words, "It might cost you your life." We know from Acts 12:2 that James, the brother of John, was killed by Herod Agrippa. We know by other sources that James died in 43 A.D.

Then comes the second reason. In Acts 4:13 when Peter and John are before the Jewish authorities, it says these two are uneducated men. In the original Greek it says, "idiotes." Not "idiot" in the sense we use "idiot" but meaning unschooled, uneducated. We recall that at that time only 1-2% of the people could read or write.

In that case, how could the Apostle John have written the Book of John? For these reasons and also other reasons we will look at, it seems unlikely that the Apostle John wrote the Gospel of John.

One hundred years ago the Gospel of John was much disputed. Some said it is a late writing, like 180 A.D. Today such theories are excluded because we actually now have a fragment of papyrus from early in the century. (Papyrus 52. On one side John 18:31-33 and on the other side John 18:37-38. This fragment is dated 117-138 A.D. (using paleography [the study of ancient handwriting], which is remarkably accurate).

The Gospel of John was Luther's favorite Gospel. It is the second most difficult book in the New Testament. Hebrews is the most difficult.

The Gospel of John is very different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For example, in the whole Gospel of John there is not a single case of throwing out demons (exorcism). Exorcisms are found very frequently in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. As far as the authorship is concerned, what is significant is that John is never mentioned in chapters 1-20. Only in John 21:1-2 when it lists the seven who go fishing, it says "the sons of Zebedee." It doesn't name James and John, but we know who they are.

The Beloved Disciple. Now we come to the Beloved Disciple and we'll look at those places where we have heard about him. The Beloved Disciple does not appear in the first twelve chapters, which are often called "The Book of Signs." Chapters thirteen through twenty are called "The Book of Glory." At the Last Supper the Beloved Disciple is leaning on Jesus' breast (John 13:23). He right there, close to Jesus. Peter has to lean over the Beloved Disciple to ask a question.

Next is the scene at the crucifixion. At the foot of the cross Jesus looks down and sees his mother and the Beloved Disciple and says to them that Mary should take care of him, and he should take care of her (John 19:25-27).

In John 19:35 after the soldier pierces Jesus' side with the spear, the text says: "He who saw it has borne witness. . . ." Then in John 20:4 is the famous race to the tomb between the Beloved Disciple and Peter, and the Beloved Disciple gets there first. Peter catches up and goes into the tomb. Then John 20:8: "Then the other disciple [the Beloved Disciple] who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed."

In John 21:1-8 the disciples are fishing; Jesus appears on the water and John 21:7: "That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter: 'It's the Lord!'" The Beloved Disciple sees and believes before Peter once again.

Finally, Peter is restored three times for the three times he betrayed Jesus (John 21:15-17), but then in John 21:21 Peter points to the Beloved Disciple and asks Jesus: "'What about this man?' Jesus said to him: 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!'"

Then John 21:24 says the following about the one who is the witness behind the Gospel of John: "This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and who has written these things; and we know that his witness is true."

If we were inclined to think that the Apostle John from Galilee wrote the Gospel of John, it is important to note that the whole Galilean ministry is left out. And the Gospel of John does not seem to be an eye witness account. It does not have that coloring. The raising of the daughter of Jairus, the Transfiguration account, and the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane are not there. Why would the Apostle John leave all that out?

The Gospel of John was controversial in the early church. For example, in John 14:28 Jesus says: "The Father is greater than I." That sounds heretical, and there were those who opposed the Gospel of John. But if they had known it was from the Apostle, they would not have dared to question it. Later, of course, the church then accepted the Gospel of John.

Who was the author? Some have said it was Lazarus. After all, in John 11:3, 5, and 36 (three times) it says Lazarus is the one whom Jesus loved. But after John 12:1-8 Lazarus disappears. It is odd that Lazarus appears only there and not for the rest of the Gospel of John. Others have said it is the John Mark who is associated with the Gospel of Mark. Or that it was Matthias who replaced Judas. But most commonly it is said by those who work on this that it was an educated disciple, not one of the Twelve, and we don't know his name. He is not just a symbolic figure. This one is a witness (John 19:35, 21:24). He is not an abstract figure; he is someone in addition to Peter and Mary, who are eye witnesses.

The other important thing is that in all of the places John is mentioned, except at the cross itself, it is always a competition between the Beloved Disciple and Peter, and the Beloved Disciple comes out ahead. There's something going on here. This scene at the cross could hardly be one of the Twelve because in Matthew, Mark,

and Luke it says all the disciples fled. It even says this in John 16:32. Jesus says to the eleven, because Judas has gone: "You will all flee." It would be extremely difficult to understand if three chapters later he's at the foot of the cross with Mary.

Who is this person, and why is the Gospel of John put together in this way? What we have here is this community who knew the Beloved Disciple as their contact with Jesus. He was their witness, their authority, their mentor, the one who laid his head on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper (John 13:23). And they were extremely upset because they thought he would live until Jesus came again. But he did die. However, he left this witness; he is the one behind the witness written here, not necessarily the one who wrote it but the witness behind it.

We mention all of this to ask ourselves: How do we sort out the Bible? It would be easy to say: Let us just say the Gospel of John was written by the Apostle John and forget the rest.

When we look at Scripture seriously, we find treasures galore. We see the rough-hewn "sons of thunder" and the competition between Peter and the Beloved Disciple. We see the disciples' me-first expectations of sitting at his right hand and a second coming that had not come. We see that questions about the Gospels and their authors are not as simple as we might have imagined.

Most of all, we see how through these very human witnesses the Lord works to spread the Word about what happened on Good Friday and Easter: God in Christ died on the cross for you and me. He is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen