

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
July 10, 2016
Power-Packed Postcards**

3 John

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Hymns: 521 – 456 – 773 – 494

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

This week, we are back on vacation as a church, traveling to some of the most unfamiliar locations of our Bible as we look at the four shortest books of the Bible. Part of vacation for Christians, I hope, is visiting other churches in the destinations to which we travel. What a blessing it is to experience the reality of the unity that we enjoy in our Synod and to find fellow Christians to worship with – really no matter where we go. And whenever I visit a church, I find something that I can bring home with me. If finding a WELS church to visit during your travels isn't something you regularly do, I'd encourage you to add it to your vacation checklist the next time that you travel.

Today, we have the opportunity as traveling Christians to visit a 1st century Christian church. And perhaps, for some of you, that gives you the mental picture that we are going to be visiting a church that would be the perfect destination. I believe that we often read about the close, committed Christian churches in the New Testament and get the impression that it was some Eden-like garden spot in church history.

But the travel brochures of the New Testament actually depict quite a different setting. The scorching heat of persecution drove many away. The annoyance of heresy needed to be swatted away like bothersome bugs. And, like sand in the bathing suit, there were always abrasive people in the church to cause friction and issues. It wasn't all perfect and for a very good reason.

Visit a church and you will find people, and though a visit only gives you a quick snapshot of those people, a snapshot is all you need to view to see that the people inside of any church aren't perfect.

As we open up to 3 John today (end of your Bibles, two pages before Revelations), I hope that we might

find something to bring home with us as we look inside the church that is opened before us.

The letter begins with the same two words that our last letter began with – “the Elder” – that means we are again reading the words of the Apostle John, writer of the Gospel, the man known “as the disciple whom Jesus loved,” the only one of the 12 disciples who was not martyred. He was the “Old Man” of the church, literally and figuratively. And since he is the writer, that means that we are visiting one of the seven churches in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) where John did most of his mission work. Most likely, this letter is a snapshot of the church in Ephesus, the great port city.

John's picture of this church is going to allow us to see three of the laymen who were part of that church. As we meet them, we are going to see the important impact – positive and negative – that individuals make inside of the church.

The first person that we meet as we go inside this church is a man named Gaius. The name doesn't tell us much. Like Jim or John, Gaius was one of the most common Latin names in the Roman Empire. In fact, there are a few men that we find in Paul's letters that go by the name of Gaius, but this Gaius is probably not to be confused with any of them.

What we do know about this man is that he was close to John, and we can tell that by the manner in which John writes. Four times in these 14 verses, John calls Gaius his dear friend; in the Greek the word is “Beloved.”

And we can see the genuine care and affection, too, as we read John's opening words in verse 2: **“Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.”** Before John got to business, he wanted his friend to know that he was thinking about him, praying for him, and not just that he might have physical health and prosperity, but that his soul might be getting along well.

As we walk into this church through John's words, it's ironic that we meet Gaius first. I say that because it appears that if we had walked into that church physically, there's a good bet that we would've met Gaius first there as well. Here's what we find as we meet Gaius: **“It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. ⁴I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. ⁵ Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. ⁶ They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. ⁷ It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. ⁸ We ought**

therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.

Not everyone who helped win WWII went overseas to fight Hitler. Many stayed behind to work in factories, to build ships and planes, to craft guns and munitions. Others took jobs as seamstresses or suppliers. Many bought bonds, planted Victory gardens and sent postcards. Though these people never fought on the frontlines, they were fellow workers with those soldiers in the cause of winning the war.

Gaius was not a travelling apostle or teacher. He very likely was not the overseer or elder of this local church. He was a person of the pew, a layman. And perhaps there were times when Gaius thought he was an insignificant or replaceable part of the church. “There are thousands of me,” Gaius may have thought. But Gaius had an important role in this church and John wanted him, and his fellow members, and all of us to know it.

Gaius was a supporter. He was there to welcome those who came to the church, faithfully meeting his brothers with a smile and hospitality. And there was nothing insignificant about his work – done for the Lord and his church. Just think, his work and the attitude with which he carried out that supporting work are recorded in the Bible! This is Gaius.

The second person that we meet in our visit to this church probably wishes John had never written. His name is Diotrephes. John tells us about him with these words: **“I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. ¹⁰ So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.”**

If Gaius would’ve been standing at the front door welcoming us with a smile, Diotrephes would’ve been pushing him aside, hoping to get to us for a very different reason. He wasn’t there to welcome people with hospitality, instead he wanted to make sure to let you know how things “really” were in this church. He viewed this as “his” church and he didn’t want anyone messing it up. He wanted to make sure that everyone knew what he wanted, how he would do things, how everyone – including the apostles – were wrong if they were opposing him.

Diotrephes was forceful, and also influential. And he used that sway that he had to hurt John, his reputation and his ministry with gossip, and he had convinced members inside this church to push away all outsiders. Diotrephes had slowly become a tyrant, seeking to control the group by himself, cutting off outside influence, and pushing away from the church anyone who didn’t agree with him.

How could one person cause so many problems? Think of a group walking down the street and a single person walking towards them. If that single person thinks only about himself and where he is going, there are two options. As we walk forward, he will either cause the group to split to avoid him; or, if they stand their ground, he will bump into them and cause disruption. As Diotrephes put himself first, this one man was causing divisions and disruptions that were having an impact on all of the church.

Before we meet the third person in this church, John interjects with an exhortation. After seeing the bad impression made by Diotrephes, he wants to make it clear that this attitude had no place in the church, so he writes in verse 11, **“Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.”**

And as another example of good inside the church, John points us to Demetrius. In Demetrius, we find another Christian helping in the church. Demetrius was likely the one carrying the letter for John and delivering it to Gaius. And look at the introduction that John gives us to Demetrius in verse 12: **“Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone--and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.”**

Running into Demetrius in this church would’ve been a breath of fresh air; he’d be that person that everyone liked and that the pastor hoped every new person would talk to. John says that everyone spoke well of him – his fellow Christians, the apostles, even truth itself. What a blessing to the church a person like Demetrius is!

As we look into this church, a truth becomes clear: Christ is the foundation of the church, but people often show the Church to the world. As we look at this church, what do we see?

Demetrius, Diotrephes, and Gaius represent the peaks and valleys in the early Church’s landscape. As mountains cannot exist without valleys, so churches will always have low points. And so in 3 John we see a church that was not perfect; a church that needed instruction and correction; a church that even needed sharp discipline and change. But we also are shown a church that was filled with the love of the Savior; that loved the truth; that supported the work of spreading the Gospel. We view that by the individuals that we see inside this church.

The church was made of people, and every single one of them mattered, and John drove that point home as he closed his letter. In a very personal way he wrote, **“Greet the friends there by name.”** Each of them were important!

As you think about our own church, how do you view it?

Often times, I believe that it's easy for us to view the church – our church - as an entity, as this big unit about which we can make large, sweeping characterizations, as this organization which exists no matter what.

And when we take that broad view of the church, it's easy for each of us as individual members to say, "I don't matter." No matter what I do or don't do, positive or negative, it's not going to have that much of an impact. And we can use that attitude to downgrade the importance of our individual gifts and service. We can also use that attitude to minimize the effect of our negativity and flaws. It sounds like this: "If I'm not here in church for a few weeks, it won't affect anyone. If I'm not giving or using my gifts, no one's going to notice. If I'm negative or apathetic, it won't hurt the church."

But individuals matter in the church, every single one of us is important. Our visit to this church in John's 3rd letter showed us that, but there's something much greater that shows us the value of individuals. It is the work of our Savior Jesus.

Throughout his time on earth, Jesus showed his care for individuals. It's why he talked to the Samaritan woman at the well; it's why he called Zaccheus down from the Sycamore tree; it's why he dipped his hand in the bowl with Judas. Ultimately his care for individuals is what took him to the cross, where he died for each person's individual sins.

He continues to give that same individual care to each of us. He calls each of us into his family by name through the waters of Baptism. He comes near to each of us in the body and blood of the Holy Supper and says, "Given for *you*!" He has his Word proclaimed in such a way that there are times when you know it was just for you. Jesus cares about you as an individual.

And he says that you matter in his church. It's why he encourages you to not give up meeting together, even as some fall into that habit. Why? Because your presence matters to the people who are around you.

It's why he says that we have different gifts, given to each one, just as he determines. Why? So that you know that your gifts matter. You have a way to serve, a way to contribute, a way to build the Family of Believers.

It's why he encourages you be made new in the attitude of your mind? Why? Because your attitude matters. The way in which you live and work and worship has an impact.

You matter, and that's because you aren't part of some huge self-propelling entity that functions with or without you. Instead you are a part of the Body of Believers, and though every individual part of the

body has a different purpose, each part and function is important, each part impacts the rest, each part affects the church!

Christ is the foundation of the church, but ultimately, it is people who show the Church, it is you who shows the Church. You live as a window for others to see into Christ's church, as you think about the way in which you live, what will people see?

Imagine, as you leave today, that a letter was being written about you and your attitude and actions inside the church. What would it say? May we shine as the lights that Christ has called and enabled us to be, so that through us, Christ himself can be clearly seen in a world of darkness.