

BORDER CROSSING

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1 John 5:1-6

Napoleon Bonaparte was born on the island of Corsica to an Italian family of minor nobility. Because Corsica had been annexed into the Kingdom of France, Napoleon, as a young man, joined the French army. He rose rapidly through the ranks. In addition, he also accrued political power with his military victories in Egypt. In 1799, he engineered a coup in France and became ruler of that nation as First Consul of the Republic. Six years later, in 1804, he reinstated the monarchy and named himself Emperor of the French. As his empire expanded, he ruled over much of continental Europe for ten years until his defeat in 1814. He was exiled to the island of Elba. However, the following year, he escaped Elba and returned to power in France. His enemies, led by the British and the Prussians, defeated him in Belgium at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. He was exiled for good to the island of Saint Helena (he-lee'-na) where he died six years later.

Because Napoleon's military victories had redrawn the political maps of Europe, the boundaries of many nations needed to be re-established. This was accomplished through various treaties. One such treaty was the Treaty of Kortrijk¹ which was signed in 1820 in the Belgian city of Kortrijk. And one of the boundaries in question was the northern boundary of France and the southern boundary of The United Kingdom of the Netherlands. Today, this part of that kingdom is the nation of Belgium.

Once this treaty was signed and the boundaries established, large stone markers were placed along the 390-mile border. These stones are about three feet high and weigh about 400 pounds. For the past 200 years they have faithfully marked the division between those two great nations. That is, until earlier this year when a Belgian farmer relocated one of the stones into French territory inadvertently enlarging the nation of Belgium and diminishing the territory of France as well as disrupting a two-century treaty. Why did he move it? Because it was in the way of his tractor and he got tired of maneuvering around it. The dislodged stone was discovered by amateur historians surveying the border.

This is, of course, an international incident. Throughout history, actions like this have incited men to take up arms. However, in this instance, both sides have approached the situation good-naturedly and have promised there will be no border war. The farmer was sent a letter demanding that the stone be returned to its

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Kortrijk

rightful location. And just how far did the farmer move this stone? Just a smidgen over seven feet.² Not far, but enough to get a write-up in the New York Times.

Borders are important. We need them to define nations and states and towns. Without borders, we wouldn't know where France ended and Belgium began. Without borders, we couldn't define ourselves as Americans or Tennesseans. Can I call myself a Tennessean if I move across the border to Kentucky? We need borders to know where to vote and to pay our taxes. Borders tell us what language to speak, what currency to use, what anthem to sing, what flag to salute, what side of the road to drive on.

Our faith has its own borders as well. As Christians, we are defined by a set of beliefs. One excellent expression of these beliefs is the Apostles Creed—"I believe in the God the Father Almighty. I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, who... was crucified, dead, and buried." These borders of faith are not intended to keep people in or to keep them out. They are not exclusive. Rather, they define who we are. The borders don't judge. They simply say that to be a Christian, you must reside within the parameters of these beliefs. If you believe something different, that places you outside the border and makes you something other than Christian.

The letter of 1 John, which I read a moment ago, is a letter concerning borders. This letter was written to a community where the borders of belief had become murky. Someone had shifted the stones demarcating Christian faith. The audience of this letter is a congregation in conflict because of the influence of false teachers. These teachers had since left the church but their influence lingered on. The fear was that their teaching would be adopted by new, impressionable believers who would follow these false teachers outside the church.

Specifically, these false teachings being spread in the community denied the humanity of Jesus. They taught that Jesus was, and always had been, a spirit sent from God who only "appeared"³ to be human. They taught that Jesus was never truly flesh and blood like us. He was divine, but not human.

The reason this notion is appealing to people is that it makes being a Christian much easier. Without flesh, then there is no death and resurrection, there is no suffering, there is no sacrifice. It is much easier to worship a dispassionate spirit.

On the other hand, when Christ becomes human like us then he becomes a model for us—a model who gave and sacrificed and died and asks that we do the

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/05/world/europe/france-belgium-border-moved.html>

³ Greek *dokeo*, appear

same. Christianity becomes much easier without sacrifice, with a Christ who is just a spirit who never suffered or died, who never gave his life for us.

Like the Treaty of Kortrijk, 1 John is a treaty that seeks to reset the boundaries of our faith.

This book is based on two assumptions. The first is that we believe in God. The second is that God is good. It assumes that the reader comes to the book with these two beliefs—they believe in God and God is good.

In our reading for today, which comes from the final section of this book, the author makes three assertions about living within the borders of Christian belief. I like to think of these as three boundary stones. They are 1) that Jesus is the Christ, 2) that love demands obedience, and 3) that Jesus was both holy and human. Let's look at these.

Our reading opens with the statement that says, "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God and whoever loves the Father also loves the child who is born of him." This is where we need to start with that assumption that we, as people of faith, love God. If we love God—who is the Father—then we will also love God's child. That child is Jesus who is the Christ, the Messiah, God's anointed one. The first boundary stone says that if we love God, then we should love and accept his Son.

And, loving God is not just about loving the Son, it is about loving all of God's children. The book states in a previous chapter that *The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also* (4:21). In other words, if we love the Father, we need to honor his love by loving his children—our siblings in faith. We are not to be like those false teachers who looked with disdain on those who did not share their spiritual vision.

So, what does this mean? It means that if we love God then we will accept Jesus as our Christ, and that we will love all of God's children. And that last part is hard to do because some people are difficult to love. But it is on us as believers—as those living within the borders of faith—to sacrifice and even suffer to love others.

Think of someone in your life that is challenging to love and ponder on what you must do to love them as a child of God. What do you need to sacrifice in order to view them as a child of God? Is it your pride, your entitlement, your self-image, your fear? What is it?

The second stone establishes that love demands obedience. If we love God, then we will obey his commandments. Some may argue that God is all about rules. But we know that for those who love God then following God's rules is not burdensome. If we love God, if we abide with God, then we should want to do what God wills.

For example, we can look at the Ten Commandments and ask if these are rules to be obeyed or descriptions of what it means to believe in God. In other words, if we truly love God and abide with God in our hearts, do we *not kill* because God commanded us to, or do we *not kill* because killing is outside the boundaries of our faith? Those who choose to live with God are those people who choose not to kill, or steal, or covet. Those who choose to worship God and God alone, who reject idols, and celebrate the Sabbath do so not because they have been ordered to, but because they desire to. It is who they are.

So, as this book of 1 John tells us, people of faith are those who 1) believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and 2) are those who joyfully obey God's commands.

Our third boundary stone asserts that Jesus was both human and divine. This one is a tough sell. We must believe that God came to us as one of us. The false teachers were telling believers otherwise and bringing conflict into the ranks.

When the writer says that Jesus came to us *by water and blood* he is speaking of the water of baptism (Jesus' divine side) and the blood of his death (his human side). This belief is non-negotiable. This, more than anything, defines us as Christian—that we believe in a God who came to us and suffered for us.

As I said earlier, it is easy to believe in a spirit—a god who is distant and dispassionate. But by coming to us as one of us, our Christ takes our pain and anguish. He suffers for us and asks that, in turn, we suffer for others. No one likes to suffer. But if we abide with God, then suffering is not a burden. It becomes an expression of faith.

Jesus comes to us both with the holy water of his baptism and with the blood of his suffering. To live within the borders of Christianity, we have to accept this.

The book of 1 John addresses a community struggling with the question of what it means to be Christian in the face of temptation.

Even today, false teachers and false prophets are with us with their alluring promises of an easy faith and shortcuts to salvation. They are out there constantly moving the boundary stones, tempting us outward with their version of Christ who is easy to follow. If we listen to them, we can become lost without even realizing it.

So, as the church, as a community of faith, as believers in Christ, let us be strong, let us rely on one another for support, let us love God, love Christ, and love one another.

Amen.