

III John

NOT TOO IMPRESSIVE

How many of you know about and admire Gaius? What? You are telling me that even though one of the books of the New Testament is written specifically to Gaius – honoring and complimenting his work and way of life – still you do not highly regard him? Not your fault, of course. He simply is “not too impressive.” And that is precisely why I want to talk about him. Gaius, at least for this morning, is the patron saint of the common, everyday Christian – the kind of person the Kingdom of God depends on, here on earth.

By the way, how many followers of Jesus can you name from New Testament times? It is an interesting exercise. I slow down around fifty, and I think about this stuff all the time. I remember people you probably do not – like Nympha. The church in Laodicea met in her house. I remember because I had a seminary friend who always claimed that was the church he wanted to belong to. And do I count Demas as a follower of Jesus? I never have trouble remembering Demas. I even have a sermon entitled “Meet Mr. Demas.” I tried to preach it a couple of times but I always end up crying uncontrollably. Demas is mentioned three times in the New Testament. In Philemon 1:24, Paul mentions Demas as one of his fellow workers (along with Epaphrus, Mark, Aristarchus, and Luke). In Colossians 4:14, Paul sends greetings from Luke and Demas. But in Second Timothy 4:10, Paul comments: “*Demas forsook me, having loved this present world.*” No further comment, just this one sentence: “*Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me.*”

But my point is, more Christians gather in this sanctuary every Sunday morning than you can name out of the entire history of New Testament times. Most of you can name more members from this one neighborhood church than you can name followers of Jesus from all over the world for the first five hundred years of Christianity!

Who converted the Roman Empire, changing all human history forever? You think Paul did it single-handedly? Or that Paul and Peter did it together? All the Christians you can name from the New Testament and the first *thousand years* of church history would not make up half of the present membership of this church.

TWO THINGS:

1.) If we got as turned on as the Christians you can name from the New Testament – if we loved Jesus as much and followed the guidance

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of His Holy Spirit as faithfully – the world around us could not stay the same any more than the world around them could stay the same. It is not about gritting your teeth and trying really hard, either. *“I am the vine; you are the branches. Anyone who dwells in me, as I dwell in him, bears much fruit.”* (John 15:5) It is not opinion and it is not wishful thinking. It is Universe Law. By the way, the earliest Christians also had quarrels, differing opinions, sincere and tragic splits – as Paul did with James, and later with Barnabas. For all practical purposes, the church in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch were in different “denominations.” It was not later, “when things got corrupted,” that people started having trouble. “Loving your neighbor” in a broken world is never all cut-and-dried, like some people want to pretend. Our top Leader in the ways of love made people so angry they murdered Him in cold blood.

The point is, they changed the world anyway. Not because they were perfect; not because they made no mistakes; not because they always agreed or cooperated like everybody dreams of being able to do someday. But they did know who they trusted and who they served. And so Jesus was able to use them despite all their foibles. And there were wonderful reconciliations and incredible miracles of teammanship going on as well. I already mentioned Paul’s letter to Philemon, and in it he names Mark as a fellow worker. Mark had deserted on the first missionary journey and Paul would not allow him to come on the second, and Paul lost his best friend Barnabas over it. Now, years later, Paul and Mark are fellow workers again. It is wonderful to hear. It still does not mean they escaped the years of pain in between.

Do you know that we have had, and from time to time will go on having, controversies and misunderstandings in this church? The vast majority of them are healed before they get very far. There is a great difference between “healing” and sweeping things under the rug. Pretending love – pretending Christianity – is one of the favorite indoor sports of our time. I am very grateful that this congregation does less and less of that. I don’t do much of it either. I have never tried to play “Mr. Perfect” around here. I have never promised you that I would be the smiley, skip-over-the-surface, keep-everybody-happy-no-matter-what-they-say-or-do kind of minister. The church and the Christian Faith mean far too much to me to betray them with that kind of phony bid for organizational success. I had a job on a cruise ship once; didn’t much like it. Very few conversions, very little healing, not much transformation going on. But I love a real church.

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So I get teased sometimes, and that is healthy and friendly and I generally go along with it. But sometimes folk who don't know think the teasing is true instead of just a caricature. I am not always gruff or usually a curmudgeon. I have enormous respect and regard and love for most of the people I know – not because of any virtue in me, but because I see and sense the Creator's mark and purpose within them. I hate it when you are hurt, and I feel incredible gratitude when things go well for you. And I do not control everything that happens in this church – not anywhere close to it. Most of what has happened here could not have taken place if so many people had not stepped forward to bring their gifts and their leadership into play.

Life is short. We cannot play cutesy parlor games and still have time to be “the church.” The Christian church has strayed into many errors in our time, but the worst error of all is to think it has no importance – to think it is a side show off on the fringes of life – instead of a New WAY, a Different PATH, a journey into LIFE itself: Life with Christ. The Kingdom, like the pearl in Jesus' parable, always requires “all that we have.” If we got as turned on as the Christians you can name from the New Testament – if we loved Jesus as much and followed the guidance of His Holy Spirit as faithfully – the world around us could not stay the same any more than the world around them could stay the same. We do not have to be perfect any more than they were perfect. We do not have to pretend peace or tranquility or worldly success any more than they did. We only have to care as much, devote our lives as much, and trust God for the present and the future – like they did.

2.) That is the first point. The second point is that it was not really the heroes – the great champions, the famous names we know – who made the church what it was in the first and second centuries. It took more than fifty individuals to transform the Roman Empire – the known world of that time. Oh, I have at least as much regard and appreciation for the leaders of New Testament times as any of you do. Without them, we would no longer know what happened or why, or what it was about. But the point is, if nobody listened or did anything about it, it would not have mattered how well or poorly Paul or Peter preached. Thousands upon thousands of people I have never heard about, whose names we will never know, carried the church into reality – lived the Life: Took it into shops, homes, fights, and successes and failures. Lived it when they were sick, when they fell in love, when they were happy, when they were sad. Tried to do what they thought Jesus wanted of them when they were rich, when they were poor, when they

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were tired, when they were confused, when they lost loved ones, when they found new friends. We don't even know the names of most of the people who were martyred for their loyalty to Jesus. Is that not amazing? They cared *that* much and we don't even know their stories: how they came to know Jesus; why they decided He was important enough to trust that much; how they got into so much trouble; why they decided that Jesus was more precious to them than life itself.

What we do know is that if thousands of unknown, unnamed individuals had not believed this way – had not lived with such conviction – we would not be here. Christendom would never have survived; it would never have spread throughout the world. They carried it, lived it, sacrificed for Him, loved Him – felt blessed beyond anything else they had known or experienced in life – because the Resurrected Christ was alive and present with them. And if any of the stories are true at all, they were the most joyful, grateful, eager, and excited people the world has ever known.

We look to the past for our heritage, traditions, values, identity, roots. Without a firm grasp on the past, we cannot get our bearings. There is no way to set direction, make choices, or sense our destiny or purpose without being grounded in the past. So of course we look to the famous religious and spiritual leaders from the past. But even this can sometimes warp perspective. Forgetting their style of life, the quality of their commitment, and the devotion and faith which inspired them, we sometimes get hooked on their fame instead of on what they were like – and what they themselves lived and died for. Except for history's bad examples, the famous people we honor and remember were not very interested in fame. Fame happened to them as a side effect, often almost by accident, and usually after they were long gone.

Nonetheless, the impression is left in many of us, and perhaps we pass it on to our children as well, that if we are really good Christians – truly dedicated – we will end up as famous as those we read about and honor from the past. To be a really good Christian, one must do something unique, outlandish, startling – something unusual enough to make one famous. I think these “impressions” – these “semiconscious expectations” – are dead wrong, create false guilt, and often throw people off track.

We have over seven billion people on the earth today. Competition for becoming famous is increasing rapidly. If only one percent of us are top-quality heroes (a mere seventy million), still that is more than can become famous because we cannot remember that many names.

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Seventy to a hundred names through all history are about all most of us can hold onto and know anything about. So do we really want to be famous? Would we want our children to spend a lot of their time and life trying to become famous? No, Christianity is not about that kind of fame. We will never be impressive in the history books. Most Christians are never going to be remembered in the records of earth. And the goal of Christendom is never to make us powerful, rich, or famous in the eyes of the world. Christians do not care about earthly fame; they care about being humble, thankful, and faithful to God. The second point, then: If we do not need to be famous or need our children to be famous, that changes everything! All the values shift. The church is not about being famous, and Christianity does not depend on our being famous. It is a false goal – a false idol.

So back to Gaius (pronounced guy-like-us). Let's see if I can piece some of it together – not provable, but probable. His full name was Gaius Titius Justice. (Acts 18:7) He lived in Corinth (Greece) and was an early convert of Paul's ministry there. He was one of the few people Paul baptized personally. (I Corinthians 1:14) The church at Corinth was always Paul's most difficult congregation, full of factions and usually fighting. Gaius was a strong supporter of Paul. He was in on the wars between Gospel and Law, and he saw the church trying to take sides behind Apollos, Paul, Peter, or James instead of keeping loyal to Jesus Christ. Gaius was a man of means and a generous host. Paul stayed with him when he was writing his letter to the Romans (Romans 16:23), and apparently at that time the whole church met in Gaius' home. By the way, we have no record or evidence of any church building until the third century. When they said "church," they never meant a building. They meant the fellowship – the *ecclesia* – the people of Jesus. We do not go to church – we *are* the church.

So we come upon this letter from John the Elder to Gaius. John the Elder was, we think, like an early bishop, probably based in Ephesus (Turkey). He thought there should be cooperation between Christians everywhere. Apparently messenger/teachers had come from John before, very probably on their way to Rome, and had found some of the leaders at Corinth rude and inhospitable. But there was Gaius, who stepped forward to welcome them and put them up in his home. When this was reported to John the Elder, he could not believe there had been such rudeness. He wrote to the Corinthian church to inquire about it. Diotrophes answered his letter, with no warmth or friendship in Christ – apparently acting like he owned the church. So now John understood the situation. He then wrote to Gaius with warmest thanks. He realized

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that Gaius had stuck his neck out further than he realized, and that Gaius was struggling to be faithful regardless of what was going on around him. John let him know that another was coming to visit, and that John himself would probably be coming with them. I bet Diotrephes was in for some interesting conversations when John arrived.

But what of Gaius? It had been thirty-five or forty years since Paul had baptized him. He must have seen a lot of squabbling in all that time. Paul was long dead. Did Gaius ever get tired of the squabbling – wonder why his fellow Christians could not be more perfect? Did he ever want to quit? Nevertheless, there he was: still doing what he could to extend hospitality and to support those who spread the Message; still believing that the word of salvation and the life of the faithful community were worth all the foolishness that sometimes went on around the edges. After all, Diotrephes was only one man; he would either wake up or burn out. The Holy Spirit would go on guiding the real work. So Gaius probably had his moments of annoyance, like we all do. But he hung in, playing his own part as faithfully as he could. Paul inspired the Corinthian church – he called it into being. He spent an unprecedented two years there. But Gaius *was* the Corinthian church. He had been there forty years. He was why it survived, and he was why it had changed so many lives.

So here is Gaius ... not too impressive. Not exactly the star of the New Testament or even one of its first-string players. He is featured, by accident, in a very short letter that never would have made it into the Scriptures except for the incredible reputation of its author. But clearly Gaius is doing a really good job. It does have to occur to us that all the famous people, and indeed the church itself – and more importantly, the Christian Faith itself – in many ways were resting on and being carried by the Gaiuses: the “guys like us.” I like that! And it is really true. Sometimes we need to remember. Without people like Gaius, the Message could not have spread; the church could not have endured or survived; the “famous” people, like John, would have gotten nowhere for lack of support – and all that Jesus was and began would have been lost and forgotten.

So it depends upon the Gaiuses of Christendom. And of necessity, that is over ninety-nine percent of us. Our names, our gifts, our deeds of love; our dark nights, our testings; the faithful risks we take; the fears we overcome; the joy we find and share because of the love and mercy of God in Christ Jesus – these are not remembered or recorded in the annals of earth. But without them, the church of Jesus Christ would

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long since have shriveled up and blown away. We are also led to believe that in a higher realm, where limitations are less and understanding is immeasurably greater, these are recorded and remembered. Not for punishment, but because God's memory is not limited or faulty – and because the Christ of God truly tracks us and loves us.

It is like the following story told of Poland's famous concert pianist and prime minister, Ignace Paderewski.

A mother, wishing to encourage her young son's progress at the piano, bought tickets for a Paderewski performance. When the night arrived, they found their seats near the front of the concert hall and eyed the majestic Steinway waiting on the stage.

Soon the mother found friends to talk to and the boy slipped away. When eight o'clock arrived, the spotlights came on, the audience began to quiet down, and only then did she notice her son, up on the piano bench, innocently picking out "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." His mother gasped, but before she could retrieve her son, the master appeared on the stage and quickly moved to the keyboard.

He spoke quietly to the boy, "Don't quit – keep playing." Leaning over the boy, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around the other side, encircling the child, to add a running obbligato. Together, the old master and the young novice held the crowd mesmerized.

So it is with our own lives. Unpolished and imperfect though we may be, it is the Master who surrounds us and speaks quietly from within, "Don't quit – keep playing." And as we do, He blends our tiny tunes into a symphony that only the Christ can comprehend or bring into being.

Lots of times our lives do not look too impressive to us. I have certainly felt that way a lot in my lifetime. So have some of you. "Don't quit – keep playing." Trust God.

By the way, according to Origen, Gaius became the first Bishop of Thessalonica. Like many of you, in his own church and in the annals of the Kingdom, Gaius was a lot more impressive than the world would ever realize.