

Wearing Our Wariness (1 John 4.20-21)
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On September, 17, 1862, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. must have thought he was dying.¹ A Union soldier, Holmes had taken refuge in a farmhouse just off the battlefield at Antietam. He was badly wounded to the neck and his friend, Pen Hallowell, had sustained an injury to the arm. The two of them ran to the farmhouse for cover, where they holed up while the battle around them raged on. And Holmes must have thought he was dying. With his clothes covered in blood and his consciousness slipping, Holmes scratched out a note that read, "I am Capt. O. W. Holmes 20th Mass. Son of Oliver Wendell Holmes, M.D., Boston." He pinned the note to his chest and awaited his uncertain fate.

Holmes would later be evacuated by Union troops and taken to a nearby field hospital. He would recover from his physical wounds and go on to become a notable figure in American history, serving as a Supreme Court justice for thirty years. Yet he never would forget that moment in the farmhouse when he all he could do was pin a note to himself, lie down, and wait. He was haunted by that moment and the ways of thinking and speaking that he believed had led to it. For the rest of his life, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. would be suspicious of those who thought they were absolutely right and spoke in the language of clarity and certitude. He would be ever wary, after Antietam, of anyone who could not let the ideal world yield to the actual one. For the actuality of the

¹ See Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 41.

battlefield as he experienced it, was far too horrific to be justified by even the noblest of ideals.

The story of Holmes in the farmhouse goes a long way toward explaining his judicial philosophy. During his years on the Supreme Court, he was criticized by both the left and the right for his failure to hold to a consistent ideology. In truth, however, Holmes was governed by a sort of anti-ideology. He attempted to puzzle out how any particular matter before him might be lived out in the real world. It was a deeply pragmatic approach informed by a series of questions. What effects could an idea really have in the world? How could a thought actually be lived out? Where would a law or a ruling be felt in people's lives, in their daily experiences? Could the idea in question lead people to learn, develop, and grow? Could it instill cooperation or the notion of community? Could it contribute to the diminishment of these things? Could it lead someone to lie bleeding on the floor of a farmhouse at Antietam?

The struggle to relate ideas to their effects is nothing new. Indeed, this morning's biblical reading reminds us that people have long wrestled with the practical, lived consequences of holding a belief. There is a wariness in the text, a suspicion of sorts about what people say and how it relates to what they do. And the ancient Christian letter from which we've read this morning names its skepticism quite plainly. It translates rather well, if a bit bluntly, across the centuries. Addressed to the community of faith, the letter offers a standard of judgment that implies its own set of pragmatic questions.

“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have

not seen. The commandment we have...is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

I suppose that most people in a church would agree that we should love our brothers and sisters; such a proposition seems hardly controversial. Yet to sit with the simplicity of the admonition is to feel the complexity of the questions that begin to arise. They are questions of faith, running the gamut from how exactly we are to love our sisters and brothers, what that might mean in their lived experiences and our own, to the more nuanced consideration of God as a concept that can only be realized in and through our relatedness. Whatever God is, the ancient Christian letter suggests that we might know God and love God through knowing and loving each other. The divine is not simply to be thought about, but lived out somehow. The sacred is not only to be prayed to in private, but practiced in public. The holy is not merely to be hallowed on special days, but heralded everyday, in all of our most ordinary interactions with each other and the world. The ideas we hold in faith are to be put into practice. Only then will we know what kind of ideas they really are. Only then can we say, or can others see for themselves, what sort of faith we truly hold.

With every passing year, I spend more and more time with two particular questions of faith. The questions ground my own sort of anti-ideology, a wariness that has developed in me over time. The first question concerns how my practice is going. Practice has become for me a synonym for faith. When I ask about my own practice, I am asking myself how my religious ideas are made manifest in my life and the choices I make. This is an almost empirical faith as I can measure how I spend my days and weeks and I can count how I spend my time and money, comparing my reality to my rhetoric. The second

question, related to the first, asks if a thing is healing or harmful. There is some ambiguity with this question, as I do not always know the answer or the long term consequences and must choose and act anyway. Even so, asking if a thing—a word, a food, an activity, a project, whatever—might contribute to a greater healing or harm seems a very pragmatic question. It is healthy that we should develop such questions and ask them of ourselves on a regular basis. The questions, however, are not meant to remain simply in our heads, but to move with us into the world of real experience; we ask the questions with our minds, but we answer them with our lives.

This morning I would invite you to develop your own set of questions, and, with them, a certain wariness informed by the ancient Christian community's idea that to love the divine is to love the human. I would invite you to consider how the teachings of our shared faith affect our lived realities. (I am putting this in the second person, but please know that these are questions that I am also asking myself.) Think about the religious or spiritual ideas that you hold. What have the ideas done? For example, have the ideas helped you to look at the places within yourself that need work? Have they helped you along the path of compassion or with the practice of forgiveness? Have the ideas helped you to widen your vision, to see more sisters and brothers than you once could? Have they helped you to make a bit of peace in your own life or in the circles within which you move on a regular basis? I suspect that the author of our ancient Christian letter would be interested in questions such as these. If we say we love God, yet the words are not lived out through love of self, sister, brother, and world, well, we may remember the author's sense of wariness. Or we may remember that same sense from the life of Oliver Wendell

Holmes, Jr., who remained haunted by his own pragmatic questions for the rest of his life.

Two days before his ninety-fourth birthday, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. died at his home in Washington, DC. As friends began the work of cleaning out his things, a curious discovery was made.² Hanging in Holmes' closet were two of the uniforms he had worn as a young officer in the Union Army. The uniforms were not clean; they were tattered and damaged, bearing the marks of the battles in which Holmes had fought. They had hung in his closet for years, stark and silent reminders of the power of ideas lived in the real world. Upon closer examination, it was found that a new note had been pinned to the breast of one of the jackets. Scratched out in Holmes' hand, it read, "These uniforms were worn by me in the Civil War and the stains upon them are my blood." Presumably, the note was addressed to whom it may concern. But one can't help but wonder if the note wasn't really from Holmes to himself, a reminder of his own experience meant to keep him both wary and watchful. For the ideas we hold can lead to great harm when they are put into practice. Or they can lead to a kind of healing as we live them with our days. And so the pragmatic questions are as follows: Will our ideas, when lived, result in broken bodies on a battlefield or broken bread around a table? Will our ideas, when lived, result in the preservation of the status quo or new protections for the most vulnerable? Will our ideas, when lived, result in the destruction of our Earth and its resources or the creation of a more sustainable life for us all?

² Ibid., 437.

Our ancient Christian letter teaches that to love God is simply an idea without effect until we love what we can see in the real world. Today may we go with this admonition and its questions, warily wondering what difference our faith might make.

May it be so.