

The glue that held the early church together was their belief that Jesus was the Son of God. Without that conviction, Christianity would not have survived. Without that conviction, we struggle too.

Throughout the Easter this year our second reading will be drawn from the First Letter of John. There are five books of the New Testament attributed to John: the gospel, three letters, and the Book of Revelation. The first letter is scary to read because it shows how serious was the threat to the early Christian community. Today's passage from Acts of the Apostles shows the apostolic church at its best: everybody sharing what they owned for the sake of the needy. They did not tithe. They didn't give 10% and then stop. If helping the needy meant giving 80 or 90%, that's how they contributed to the church. Those were the glory days of the Christian community, shortly after the death of Jesus. By the time the Gospel of John was written, maybe around the year 90, antagonism between Jews and Christians had grown strong. Parts of John's Gospel sound downright anti-Jewish today, like the opening of this passage that says the disciples locked the doors "for fear of the Jews," as if this was an enemy you just couldn't trust. Hostilities between Christians and Jews had deepened by the time of John's gospel.

But when the First Letter of John appeared, probably around the year 100, another problem tore at Christians. Some people who were once faithful members now had drifted away and were forming their own communities. A rift grew among Christians themselves. This letter tried to get people back in touch with the central beliefs of Christianity.

One problem they faced was authority. Even though there was a bishop in Rome by this time, the church had not come to recognize him as a universal leader. They had to appeal to other authorities. They still had eye-witnesses around who had seen and heard Jesus. That helped. And this letter appeals to another authority: the Holy Spirit's testimony at the baptism of Jesus, that Jesus is the Son of God.

Apparently, the cause of division within the church was whether or not Jesus should have this title, the Son of God. Today's passage from the First Letter of John says this unequivocally. The victor over the world is the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. By that title, we mean that Jesus shared in the divinity of God. At a time when the early church was pulling apart at the seams, the First Letter of John came back to this core belief. If people would place their faith there, that could restore the unity of the church.

At times, a community that means a lot to us may be pulling apart. It can happen when there is no leadership, as when a central figure in a family dies, when a business files for bankruptcy, or when a baseball team struggles to find an owner. When a nation has a series of leaders in a fairly short period of time, as Russia has experienced in the last decade or so, as Italy has since World War II, people feel unstable. Sometimes we become disillusioned with a trusted family member, whose behavior has crossed an ethical border. Whatever it is that shakes the world around us, we can stabilize ourselves by this central Christian belief, that Jesus is the Son of God.