

SERMON: 20 October 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“The One who overcame lives in us to overcome in a communion that reveals God’s love.”

(Revelation 3:1-22 and Colossians 1:15-20)

[2 SLIDES]

You can’t read the letters to these 7 infant churches without hearing the repeated refrain of ‘to him who overcomes’. The Risen Christ who has appeared to John in blazing glory gives John a message for the 7 new churches in what was then, Asia Minor.

Part of the message to each of the churches is about overcoming. It’s clear that God’s desire, in Christ, is that people will overcome.

Remember the chant taken up in the 1960’s civil rights movement in America, and the crowds would sing;

**we shall overcome, we shall overcome one day,
O deep in my heart I do believe, we shall overcome one day**

I was thinking of what it would look like to be dressed in white and sit on a throne and be given a new name; things that Jesus promises the 7 churches to those who overcome. And there was this picture on the news this week as I was pondering that.

[SLIDE]

The Queen dressed in white on the throne is a very human symbol of what it might look like to overcome but it’s not something we’re all going to enjoy in this life; at least it won’t look like that for the majority of us. But this picture says something about the human desire to be more than our current state.

And thankfully there are no limits on entry into God's kingdom, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, to those who are prepared to believe.

Jesus overcame the world, sin and death; and it's in that same same Spirit of overcoming that we now live.

Here's how John puts it in his first letter:

**[SLIDE] "everyone born of God overcomes the world"
(1 John 5:4)**

And he helps explain that concept in the following verse when he defines the person born of God as one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God; and that it's that faith that brings the victory.

Simple isn't it? Why then do we make it so complicated?

Because the truth is that the life of Christ now pulses through our veins. Christ is our life blood.

**[SLIDE] "Whoever has the Son has (eternal) life"
(1 John 5:12)**

God has made it possible for us to overcome as Jesus overcame, because we have his life in us by faith. And so we can overcome the ways of sin, the trappings of the world and the last enemy of all, death itself.

And one thing that has spoken loudly through this word is this: God desires that we overcome our illusion of separateness; that we conquer the false notion that we are individuals separated from God and from one another. Instead God bends us towards oneness; a union with God and one another; which we can call a common union or better still, communion.

Sometimes we need to wake up to see things more clearly, just as Jesus says to the church at Sardis, wake up, or come awake.

It was later in his life that Henri Nouwen discovered a new depth to Oneness and unconditional love in what he called a communion or [SLIDE] “a community that exists to reveal God’s love”.

After a successful career as a seminary professor and best-selling author, Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest, made a dramatic life change. Leaving the academic world behind, he went to work as a chaplain at the L'Arche Daybreak community in Toronto, one of a worldwide family of L'Arche communities, founded by French Christian visionary Jean Vanier, where severely mentally and physically disabled people live in community with those of normal abilities. In such a place, caregiving moves in both directions, with those in a caregiving role often feeling like they are the ones being cared for.

Henri describes how, one day, a disabled community member named Janet came up and asked him for a blessing. Henri was distracted by other things, so he quickly traced the sign of the cross on her forehead.

"No," protested Janet. "I want a real blessing!"

Henri understood, then, how he had been insensitive to her need. He promised that, at the next prayer service, he would have a special blessing for her.

At the end of the prayer service, about thirty people were sitting in a circle on the floor. Henri announced, “Janet has asked me for a special blessing.”

He didn't quite know what she was seeking from him, but her next move left no doubt. She walked up to him and wrapped her arms around him. As he embraced her in return, her slight form was almost covered by the folds of the white robe he wore while leading worship.

As they held each other, Henri said “Janet, I want you to know that you are God's Beloved Daughter. You are precious in God's eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house, and all the good things you do show what a beautiful human being you are. I know you feel a little low these days and that there is some sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are: a

very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you.”

Janet raised her head and looked at him. Her beaming smile told him that she had truly understood and received the blessing.

What happened next was unexpected. As Janet returned to her place, another woman raised her hand. She, too, wanted a blessing. She stood up and embraced Henri, too, laying her face against his chest. After that, a great many more of the disabled members of the community took their turn, coming up for the same sort of blessing.

For Henri, the most touching moment was when one of the assistants, a twenty-four-year-old college student, raised his hand and asked, “And what about me?” John was a big, burly young man, an athlete. Henri did the same with him, wrapping his arms around him and saying, “John, it is so good that you are here. You are God's Beloved Son...”

John looked back with tears in his eyes and simply said, “Thank you, thank you very much.”

- Based on a story told by Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 70-72.

Let's not be lukewarm with our faith, like the church at Laodicea. Let's embrace the unconditional fire of God's love and let's walk through the open door that God has placed before us today; and journey there in faith together. For it's only together that we can overcome and it's only together that we can see the fullness of God's love.

May we pray:

We praise you God

For the divine life at work within each of us through faith;

For the peace of knowing all is well;

For the hope of what is to come;

For the love that endures all things;
For our togetherness,
And for the grace that reveals your unfailing love.