

“First Century Smackdown”
3 John
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Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the fight of the century! The first century that is. In this corner, in the purple and white trunks, hailing from somewhere in the Roman Empire, with a record of 13 excommunications, and weighing it at a metaphorical 387 pounds, the champion, Diótrephes. And in this corner, in the red and gold trunks, in his first professional bout, with nothing but a letter to commend him, the challenger, weighing in at 157 pounds soaking wet, Demetrius. Ladies and gentlemen, tonight’s fight of fifteen verses is brought to you by the Presbyter, and will be for the championship, the winner taking the belt as “Christian of the Century.” The referee for tonight’s bout is none other than Gaius. Are you ready to rumble?

If you are wondering how you came to church and ended up at a Lucha Libre match, it’s because the Third Letter of John leaves so much to the imagination that it is easy, some might say essential, to fill in the gaps. Not only is 3 John the shortest book in the New Testament, it just might be the vaguest. In fact, there is so little to go on here that scholars believe this was one of the very last books to be accepted as Scripture, as it receives no mention among early church writers until late in the third century. It could have been ignored because it was simply overlooked because its mere fifteen verses got lost at the end of a scroll, but

more likely since it is not exactly a mine for theological gemstones. If you can't come up with any quotable verses from Third John, that's because there aren't any; the closest we come is the phrase in verse two, "it is well with your soul," which made it into the nineteenth century hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul," which we sometimes sing here at ECF, but nothing else in that hymn besides this one phrase would make us think of Third John. Truly, this book falls into that category of "Remind Me Why This Is In My Bible?"

On the other hand, however, it just may be that Third John is precisely the reason we are here tonight. That is because Third John deals with how to treat missionaries, and whether we are missionaries ourselves, as some of us are, we are all the product of missionary endeavors, somewhere in our past. If there had been no missionaries way back then, there would be no church here and now, and so we owe a certain debt to John if indeed his words about offering hospitality to those who traveled to share the word of God had anything to do with the success of the early missionary movement, and we must believe they did. Diótrophes and Demetrius are lost in the mists of time, but there are still brothers and sisters sharing the Gospel who need a place to spend the nights of their journeys, and so we must wrestle with the words of Third John.

The author of this letter, John by tradition since there is no name attached to it other than "The Elder," is writing to his friend in the faith, Gaius, to seek a place for a certain Demetrius to spend the night. We can infer that Demetrius is a

missionary of some sort by noting the flattery which John showers upon Gaius when he says, “Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you; they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.” In other words, you have received guys like Demetrius in the past; please do so once again. He goes on to explain that the infamous Diótrephe has not only refused to host these travelers but has prevented others from doing so, and even thrown some of them out of the church for being willing to receive missionaries. It was likely that Demetrius himself carried this letter as both an introduction to Gaius, as well as a sort of insurance policy.

The letter, of course, had more than one purpose. Of course, it would have been nice for Demetrius to be able to stay with friends in the faith, but there was also the matter of the behavior of Diótrephe about which he wants to warn Gaius and the others in his community. From the description here, Diótrephe was not a very nice person, and John lists the reasons why, namely that he likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge John’s authority, and spreads false charges against John and his church, on top of the refusal to offer hospitality and the punitive actions against those who would. We are led to believe that this Diótrephe has intercepted the letter which John says he wrote to the church, a

letter which perhaps commended its intended recipients to offer the all important hospitality for people like Demetrius. This letter, the one that has survived as Third John, will arrive with Demetrius himself to make sure that the message gets through this time.

What message did he want to share in that first letter? Perhaps it was the one which he shares now when he takes the opportunity to make sure Gaius sees the difference between Diótrepes and Demetrius, and in so doing, he traces for us the outline of an exemplary disciple in the early church. John comes closest to saying something about God in his transition from warning about Diótrepes to commending Demetrius. “Beloved,” he says, “do not imitate what is evil, but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” It doesn’t take much reading between the lines to see that Diótrepes represents evil, and that Demetrius (and Gaius if he will receive him) represent good. “Everyone has testified favorably about Demetrius, and so has the truth itself. We also testify for him, and you know that our testimony is true.” He doesn’t really say anything positive about Demetrius, but then again he doesn’t really have to! Not only does he come recommended by John, and commended by the very truth itself, in other words, God, but he is very clearly not the villain Diótrepes, about whom very many negative things have been said. Perhaps this has been a lesson for campaign managers through the centuries; all you have to do

is say something negative about your opponent, and your own candidate looks great without saying anything at all about him or her!

It is true that there is not much theology, not much God-talk, in Third John, but there is a guide for how to behave as one who says they follow Christ. We often romanticize the early church and how they all seemed to get along, sharing their goods with all as they had need, praying and breaking bread together, but the good old days were not without their wrestling matches. There were people who disagreed with one another, people who vied for power, people who tried to rally the faithful to their own side, thinking it was best. History is always written by the victor, and so we have come to believe that John was right and Diótrephe was wrong, because we are reading John's words, but we really don't know how fair the fight was. John seems almost as petty as he claims Diótrephe was being. There is some fact in his charges, but also some slander, some strong hinting that his rival is not only inhospitable, but also evil, a pretty grave charge to level against a brother or a sister. And so, as we take wisdom from Third John, let it be John's about offering true hospitality, and imitating what is good, but let it also be in the light of our own imperfection, and our own tendencies to exaggerate both the sins of our rivals but also the measure of our own grace and generosity. May the testimony about our walk in the truth be like that of Demetrius, rather than Diótrephe, but let us also testify truthfully and fairly and with grace, about ourselves as well as others. Neither John nor Diótrephe really distinguished

himself in this early church squabble. It is left for Gaius and Demetrius and all of us to do that in God's eyes, and in the hearts and minds of those whom we would serve.

Let me leave you with this final thought about this Lucha Libre we call life and faith. John places the burden of our faithfulness on the testimony others give about us, but also on the testimony that seems self-evident, what he calls the testimony of the truth. The testimony of others about us is important, to be sure. It reflects at least some truth as to our character, and we hope and pray that those offering testimony about us are doing so in the light of the truth and not with the light of their own hopes or fears that they are projecting on us. The possibility that others may testify unkindly about us, that they may judge us in spite of their ignorance about our motives, and without an awareness of their own blindspots should not deter us from seeking to be praiseworthy. But neither should our desire to be praised, to be testified about positively, be what drives our walk in the truth, and our imitation of what is good. Rather, it is to be testified about by the truth itself that should drive us, to do our good deeds even if they go unseen, to not let our left hand know what the right hand is giving away. We may receive no praise during our lifetimes for our efforts on behalf of the truth. We may even be persecuted by well-meaning brothers and sisters about whom others have testified positively. We may be the Galileos of our own time, proclaiming the truth that no one around us is willing to accept, even those in our own corner. You remember

that in the seventeenth century, the astronomer Galileo championed the heliocentric view of the solar system, the idea that the earth revolved around the sun, not the other way around. Condemned as a heretic for proclaiming something we now all take for granted, Galileo died under house arrest. The Grand Duke of Tuscany at the time, wanted to bury him in the main body of the Basilica of Santa Croce, next to the tombs of his father and other ancestors, and to erect a marble mausoleum in his honor. These plans were scrapped, however, after the Pope and an influential Cardinal protested, citing the fact that Galileo had been condemned by the Church for “vehement suspicion of heresy,” the testimony of his brothers in the faith. He was instead buried ignominiously in a small room at the far end of the Basilica. But here’s the testimony of the truth: in 1737 after a monument had been erected there in his honor, he was reburied in the main body of the basilica where he should have been in the first place. An interesting side note is that during this move, three fingers and a tooth were removed from his remains, and one of these fingers, the middle finger from Galileo’s right hand, is currently on exhibition at the Museo Galileo in Florence.

We all have our earthly heroes and champions and we pray they will not disappoint us. We may even be those heroes and champions to others, and we pray we will not fail them. But whether or not we, or those we root for, are finally named “Christian of the Century,” the good news of the Gospel is that in the Lucha

Libre that is life, God's truth always wins, and that is sufficient for it to be well with our souls, and to love and serve in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.