

"Complete Joy!"

I John 1:1-2:2

19 April, 2009, Easter 2B

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

I John 1:1-2:2

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Prayer.

In my life

I estimate that I've been in a couple of hundred

Different United Methodist church buildings.

Each, of course, has a sanctuary,

Rooms for Christian education,

Office and storage space,

Bathrooms, kitchen, and ...

A Fellowship Hall.

Sometimes a Fellowship Hall is under a sanctuary,

Sometimes behind,

Or in our case,

Below and behind our sanctuary!

What takes place in a Fellowship Hall?

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<pause for response>

People gather;
For food,
For fun,
For missions,
For education,
For hospitality.

The common element is this word: "Fellowship."

Obviously, the common use of this word
Comes from somewhere.

There must be a reason for its nearly universal use.

We can connect the dots

Between us and our ancestors,

And between our ancestors and our Epistle lesson for this morning.

First, allow me to give a little bit of background.

First John is less a letter, and more a sermon,

Written 70 to 80 years after the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ.

It comes from a community of followers

Who gathered around the Apostle John

in the city of Ephesus, in modern day Greece.

It was written to address heretical teachers

In Ephesus, and in surrounding faith communities,

Who were denying the humanity of Jesus.

They claimed Jesus was just a spirit,

And as such,

Could not have actually died or risen from the dead.

If he didn't die,

Then there would be no atonement for our sins.

There would not be salvation as a result of his resurrection.

This belief, and these teachings

Claimed that salvation is personal

And can only be found through introspection.

This popular heretical teaching was called Gnosticism.

It sprang out of numerous ancient sources,

From the Near East and Far East,

From Jewish and Christian and eastern religions.

Gnostic belief led to unrestrained sin,

Because, sin didn't matter anymore.

The only thing that mattered was

Thinking yourself into a state of salvation.

The gospel of Thomas

Is a prime example of the Christianization

Of Gnostic thought.

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While it shows immense diversity of Christian theology
 In the early church,
 It was also banned, excluded from the Canon
 (the collection of books contained in the Bible),
 and those who believed in Gnosticism,
 as written in Thomas, and in other documents,
 were excommunicated from the Church.
 The Church sifted out the fringe of Gnosticism
 And settled in on a central core of essential beliefs.
 Jesus was both human and divine.
 He died on the cross to cleanse us of our sins.
 He rose from the dead to save us into eternal life.
 Jesus saves us,
 Not some mental or psychological exercise.
 To counter these heretical teachings,
 The Johannine community completed these sermons
 One being First John, which we read today.

John begins with witness.
 The witness is multi-sensory.
 We, the sermon begins,
 (Initially referring to John and his faith community,
 But, now, referring to us and our faith community)
 We
 Witness to what we heard,
 What we have seen,
 And to what we have touched.
 You might be able to see and hear a spirit,
 But you certainly can't touch one.
 The risen Lord is real.
 He was a man;
 Sharing the same human struggles
 As every other person on the planet.
 John shares the witness
 With others
 that they may have fellowship with us.
 Fellowship is a two way street.
 Believers witness,
 Then the unconverted have an opportunity to respond.
 Witness, response; witness, response.
 This is the characteristic of fellowship.
 This is the essential function of our Fellowship Hall.
 Ah, yes! How nice it is to know
 Our ancestors knew what they were doing

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When they named these multipurpose church rooms
Fellowship Hall.

This back and forth dialogue
That we Christians call "fellowship,"
Is done that our joy might be complete.
Fellowship is the fulfillment of our Christian commission,
The command Jesus gave his disciples
Immediately prior to his ascension.
Go "make disciples."
"Baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."
Teach "them all I have taught you,"
Jesus commands his faithful.
Our role in the equation is fellowship and instructional.
God's role is conversion and salvation.
"Lo, I will be with you always," Jesus promises.
The fact of the matter is we can't save ourselves.
We have to have a Savior.
We have to have an intimately involved divine player;
And that player is the very much human,
Son of God,
Jesus.
Because Jesus is both human and divine,
Salvation must be both personal and communal.
The internal belief
Must be joined with corporate fellowship.
Fellowship makes our joy complete
Because it results in the conversion of the world.

Dearly beloved,
These words from First John
Will hopefully change the way we think about fellowship;
Fellowship Hall,
Fellowship dinners,
Fellowship after the service has ended.
It is more than talk or gossip.
Fellowship is all about
Sharing the Good News:
That Jesus Christ
Was both human and divine.
He died for our sins.
He rose from the dead for our salvation.
He ascended into heaven, where we will one day join him.
Share the Good News,

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That our joy may be complete!
Amen.

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