

Fellowship and Atonement

1 John 1:1-2:2

Sunday, April 23, 2006

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1 John 1:1-2:2

¹We 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—²this 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—³we 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.

⁴We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

⁵This 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. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but 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. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

¹My 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; ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Prayer.

On this day, and for the following five Sundays of Easter, I will preach on the Epistle lesson from the Common Lectionary. The Gospels will continue to be read so that we will not miss these important resurrection narratives that are so central to our faith. For a refreshing change of pace, however, I believe these Epistle lessons from the First Letter of John hold sufficient gems for homiletical mining. Our own John Wesley (1703-1791), the father of Methodism, remarked about First John, “How plain, how full, and how deep a compendium of genuine Christianity!”¹

A brief background to this Biblical letter: like the Fourth Gospel, this First Epistle of John is anonymous. However, the author of Second John and Third John identifies themselves as *ho presbyteros* in the Greek, or “the elder” when translated into English. This is an early letter, dated before 135 AD, when it is echoed by the Bishop, Polycarp. Irenaeus quotes selections of text around the year 180 AD. We are confident this letter was authored between one hundred and one hundred-fifty years after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. This dates the authorship of these Epistles right around the same time as the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John. Indeed, these three letters are written in a similar style and with common Greek phrases, telling us they may have come from the same community of early church Christians.

These letters attained prominence and were included in the Canon because they do a great job of

¹ The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume XII, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, pg. 365.

establishing the foundational beliefs of Christianity, basic confessions within early Christianity about God, Christ, and Christian responsibility.² As we will hear over the next few weeks, First John lays the groundwork for heavy pieces of Christian doctrine, such as the divinity of Christ, atonement for sin, salvation, the importance of fellowship, doing God's will, living righteously, loving God and the importance of loving neighbor. The Elder's purpose for authoring this text is summed up with the fourth verse, "We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." (1 John 1:4)

In today's Epistle selection, two of these themes are carried forward – Fellowship and Atonement, both of which I would like to address this morning with a bit more depth.

I've heard it said far and wide by many, "Show me a church that doesn't get along with each other, and I'll show you a church that isn't a church any longer." In the 15 plus churches I have participated with in my nearly 45 years of life, I've seen and experienced just about every type of behavior, situation, and relationship known to human kind in local churches. One of the significant benchmarks that gauges the health of every congregation is how well they get along with one another.

Do the members of the community like being together? Are they groups of people that would naturally mix outside the church as well as when they engage in church activities and programs? These are the easier questions of Christian fellowship. The more difficult, and perhaps more important question is, when there are differences, as there will always be, does the community have in place the means to address those differences forthrightly, with fairness, dignity, and respect? In other words, does the church have the ability to deal effectively with internal strife?

If it doesn't, the community languishes in a state like purgatory, constantly focused inward, never being able to look beyond to the mission field or to a communal relationship with Christ. The Elder author of First John correctly identifies the first necessary condition for fellowship. We share the witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ so that we might have fellowship together (1 John 1:3a).

Some might bemoan the current state of affairs where many relatively un-churched people come to the pastor to be either married in the church, have their child baptized, or to bury a loved one. Even I have to keep my cynical voice under control and remind myself that this can be an opportunity for evangelism, spreading the witness, and attracting people to Christ. Here is the point: I always attempt to wiggle into the conversation somewhere or some how about the importance of relating to a local church. Connect yourselves with a community of faith where you feel comfortable and accepted, where it feels like the church is an extension of your home and family.

The fellowship of our local community of faith – of Zion – needs to reflect all the characteristics and values of home. This is why we gather as friends. We pray together. We eat together. We study together. We worship together. We sing together. We treat one another with love, respect, and grace. All these core values and characteristics we value in our homes need to be lifted up and supported in our church.

Our Epistle author tells us that when we have fellowship with one another, we also are invited into fellowship with Jesus Christ, and by doing so, our joy is complete (1 John 1:3b, 4). We are more than a social club dedicated to improving our world. We think of ourselves as the hands and feet and

² Ibid, pg. 369.

mouth of our Lord. Fellowship leads us to the understanding that we have become the Body of Christ, given life by the Holy Spirit. The spirit and soul of the church is the Holy Spirit. If there is need in the world, we, as Christ's Body, must stop and address the need, just as Jesus did during his period of ministry before his Passion. Just as Jesus reached out with compassion, love, and forgiveness to the least and the lost, so must we.

If we don't, we fail to be His Body; the Spirit is given up, and the body decays in the tomb. Like a corpse decaying in a buried coffin, a church cannot become more irrelevant to the world than when it loses all sense of mission and ministry.

The second theme of our Epistle selection for today grows out of the first. When we are in fellowship with one another and with Jesus Christ, and when we walk in the light that is God, then "the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7)

This tells us that the act of forgiveness is not simply between one person and Jesus. The act of forgiveness comes from Christ when we are in fellowship with one another and with Him. This is why it is so important – a vitally important part of the worship experience – when we can make our confession of sins together, as a congregation, as the Body of Christ.

An individual confession only goes so far. It fails to right the wrong. It neglects the victim. It allows grace to be cheapened. It allows Christians to, quite literally, get away with murder. What it does is to separate freedom and grace from responsibility. How can we be held to mutual responsibility if forgiveness is done in private?

Two essential directives are taught to the ordained, to be used in the environment of the confessional. Obviously, one of these is confidentiality. "The parish pastor is to know everything, but act as if they know nothing," I once heard a seminary professor proclaim. The second directive for the confessional is to direct the offender to take responsibility for their sin – to repent and vow not to do it again – to make reparations, that is, to make it right as if the sin had never occurred – and to experience the forgiveness of the community, the Body of Christ, in the public act of confession, pardon, and absolution.

We must take responsibility for our sins.

The Epistle author knows human nature all too well. It doesn't work to try to lie ourselves out from responsibility; to make false claims that we have no sin. This deceives no one, except ourselves, and it makes Christ out to be "a liar, and his word is not in us." (1 John 1:10b) Woe to us if we fail to take responsibility, to live responsibly, and to be responsible for our actions. We heap ashes not only upon ourselves, but we also soil the good name of Jesus.

Let that set in for a moment.

Faith without works is dead. Don't tell me about your beliefs; show me by your actions. It is one thing for the Epistle and your pastor to lay this mandate for responsibility at your feet this morning, but I expect that you will hold me to the same level of accountability. We are all in this together.

When we live in fellowship with one another, when we walk in the Light of God, and when we are honest and responsible about our sins, “the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all our sins.” (1 John 1:7b).

It is an interesting metaphor – to think of something that stains material so permanently like blood, to be the cleansing agent for anything, let alone our sins. Yet, this is an effective metaphor our early church author used to link together the cross of Calvary with the forgiveness of our sins. Who cannot imagine in their mind’s eye the rivulets of blood flowing, mingled down, from the hands, the feet, the side of the crucified Christ? Who can remain unmoved by his pierced agony, driven by a depth of love that knows no limit?

When we left the former century behind, we thought that nothing could rival the sin and depravity of humankind like that of two world wars, genocide, and nuclear proliferation. Yet, in the few short years of this new century, we have demonstrated a new order of sin and affinity for evil like no other. Fill in the details – religious extremism that leads to the fields of Darfur, Kurdistan, and Serbia. Fundamentalism that brainwashes people to become suicide bombers. Injustice so extreme that leads to poverty and starvation, exploitation and human slavery, unlike the world has ever seen. In the name of the free market, we allow the environment to be destroyed, we support childhood labor, and turn our backs on ethnic cleansing.

Too far removed from us to make a connection? Consider the cold attitude we exhibit towards people that live in the city, who may be poor, send children to city schools, or be from different ethnic backgrounds. When did it become ok for children to be chased down and shot on a city sidewalk? And when did it become ok for us to remain silent about it?

When did it become ok to slash Medicaid in the name of tax relief? It’s not welfare, as in days of old. The faces of Medicaid are the most vulnerable in society ... children, innocent in every way, born into households beyond their control. The faces of Medicaid are people with disabilities, who because of life circumstances, find themselves unable to survive with out the help and assistance of others. The faces of Medicaid are our seniors, our parents and grandparents, who have spent down life savings and must now be cared for by others, by us – why? Because it is the right thing to do. It means that we take responsibility for our neighbors, that we live in fellowship with others, and that we seek to walk in the Light.

We walk in darkness when we allow injustice to exist unchallenged, when we do nothing to live in fellowship, when we turn a cold shoulder to our neighbors – whether they are next door or living a world away.

To take seriously the atoning nature of Jesus Christ, to come to understanding of the cleansing nature of his blood, is to take seriously the sin of our world – and our participation in it. It calls us to step up and take responsibility for our faith, and our relationship with Jesus Christ, both personally and corporately, as a community of faith.

Fellowship and atonement go hand in hand, as our Epistle author, the Elder, so correctly observes. May it be so this day – in your life, and in mine. The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Amen.

