

Coffee Hour

by

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1 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—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.

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

If you were here last Sunday for the outdoor Easter prayer services we held, it was just a taste. Because in less than a month, we will be back worshipping together in-person in this very sanctuary. That's when the real work will begin anew.

Now we as the church staff have labored faithfully to keep things going over this last year; to continue offering worship services and musical concerts in some digital presentation; to move all our classes to Zoom, to do a few drive-thru events with limited physical interaction; to honor our mission and outreach commitments.

But it's not been the same. Everyone knows that. We've given it our best effort, but it's not the same. I know why. And you do too. It takes people to be the church. What I am doing on Vimeo is no less ministry on behalf of this congregation, but it's not the totality of the church.

The truth is even when we're back at first it won't be the totality of the church. Given the stipulations we are putting in place to create a safe environment for clergy and worshipers alike, services will have pre-registration and attendance caps. We will wear masks and keep social distance. Yet while I'm glad to return to worship, what I long for even beyond worship, is what happens every Sunday immediately following: coffee hour. I'll tell you right up front though it's not for the coffee.

Now if I wanted French Roast with nearly-expired non-dairy creamer in a thin paper cup, this would be the place. But neither the strength of the brew nor the quality of the beans are of relevance here. What I love is being together, in incarnational community. It is what that coffee represents to me.

The church is one of worship and fellowship alike. The writer of this epistle knows that as well. As if prepared for a homiletics class, our text this day commends to us three main arguments. The first is that true

fellowship is about our relationship with God that anticipates our relationship with one another.

It's interesting that when we wrestle with the meaning of the gospel, the appeal to unity offered by this letter is not an appeal to some creed or formal doctrine, but to a fellowship, a communion, a community.¹ Relationship becomes the mediator of divine meaning.

Johnathan Sacks, the late Chief Rabbi of the UK, wrote in a recent work, "States function on the basis of power. But a society functions on the basis of a shared vision of what unites the people whom it compromises. Societies are moral communities." He says, "the early religions created moral communities, thus solving the problem of trust between strangers. They sanctified the social order."²

The church is more than an institution that exists solely for venerative practices. We are a moral community, with a shared vision. The question can be rightfully begged, what is it? What is our shared vision? It's a fair question with a fairly basic answer: Jesus. Our vision is God's love for us in Jesus. Whatever helps us see that more clearly, helps us also to go where Jesus is going ahead of us.

In the church we don't all see Jesus in the same light, which means we might disagree about the direction that we believe he's going. We experienced that last summer.

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In response to the killing of George Floyd on a Minneapolis street, the deep wounds of racial injustice bled onto the streets of cities across the nation. Believing in God's call to work towards justice, our Session voted to affirm the work of our church's Anti-Racism Taskforce. A sign

¹ George W. Stroup, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2., 396.

² Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, 260-261.

was placed on the front lawn. “Black Lives Matter” with a subtitle, “Lower Merion Faith Communities Stand Together Against Racism.”

We heard from members and neighbors alike once the sign went up. Some voiced concern that we had become too political, others said “good job, but we have to do more than just put up a sign.”

There was confusion as well. Several folks saw it as a purely partisan act of virtue signaling. Was the church explicitly endorsing BLM as an organization? No, we were not. We were supporting, and continue to support, efforts to combat racism and racially motivated violence against black and brown bodies. That’s why the sign went up. Because what we saw in Minneapolis broke our hearts, and we believe it broke God’s too.

Certainly the church is more than the Democratic or Republican party at prayer. Yet we know what the prophet Micah proclaimed when he asked what the Lord required of us. “To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.”

The very declaration that *Jesus is Lord* means Caesar is not. Following Jesus has always been a political act. At least in part because it involves a reorientation of social values. Who is my neighbor? Who is the stranger? What is justice?

In any event, one thing that was glaringly absent from the heat of last summer was our embodied community. We couldn’t be together to talk anything out, to hear shared voices, let alone the voice of The Other in our midst. We could only offer each other sound bites instead of conversation.

St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “we see through a glass darkly,” we know only in part. And he said that when it wasn’t a global pandemic. Seems our vision has become even hazier this last year. But if our joy is to be made complete, as the writer of our text has presumed,

then that joy is to be found in the company of God and each other, listening for God's will together.

The second point of this letter follows on the first. We are named as sinners. Such a stunning proclamation of the human condition is not to further guilt or shame, but an honest reflection of our often self-absorbed nature. V.8 says "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." There's no point in denying it. The world is broken and we know it. Part of the mystery of sin is its power to deceive us.

We remember in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* when the Danish prince turns to his friends and remarks in a moment of admiration and despair, "What a piece of work is a man!" We are never going to get things completely right in this life. Not even with all of our can-do optimism. Public theologian and ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in the middle of the last century, "no society, not even a democratic one, is great enough or good enough to make itself the final end of human existence."³

But that is not to say that our calling is in vain. Because the Good News of the Gospel is precisely for the sad, pathetic, ironic, lost, and tragic dimensions of human existence. It's why we do a Prayer of Confession every Sunday. "God, we know we're a bit of a mess. We're sorry. Help us not to be so much of a mess, as we stumble to follow you. Amen." We are called to acknowledge our brokenness, and then to get to work repairing it, not just in ourselves, but in the world.

Why do we not dwell on our sin? Because the final argument of this letter points us to the reconciling work of God's love for all of us in Jesus Christ. He died, according to this text, "not only for our sins, but also for the sins of the whole world."

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 133.

Whatever happened in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus happened on behalf of all creation; and because of that, we are reckoned right by God.

When we begin to see that...our faith gains clarity. We recognize our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ is to labor together for the in-breaking of God's kingdom as Jesus himself imitated for us. Our call to make disciples is not a call to conversion, but a call to invitation.

We invite others to experience the richness of God's love. The church is the collection of folks who know that. The collection of folks whose lives have been gloriously ruined by a Jesus who endlessly pursues us with love, grace, and mercy; transforming us along the way.

It's worth noting as well that scholars believe there was a kind of Christological crisis going on in the community in which 1 John was written. The heavy emphasis on the physical nature of Jesus, one in whom they have seen with their eyes and touched with their hands is intentional. A schism has occurred whereby some have decided to part ways with the church because they believe Jesus was a merely spiritual being.

But this letter will have no part in it. To deny the flesh of him, the earthiness of him, is to deny that God participates in our shared humanity. Jesus didn't just have a body, he was a body, and is a body. Because the Incarnate Word comes to us in human flesh, the Word is invested in all of the realities of human existence. Which means our bodies matter too, not just to God, but to each other.

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I took it for granted. We all did. I'd race out of my office on a Sunday morning, and grab a quick cup before heading to my 8.45 class, offering a hurried hello to whoever was in the Court, splashing the contents as I made my way across campus.

I'd grab another cup after the 10am service, greeting visitors and checking in with folks, trying to corral my children, or at least stop them from touching every cookie on the table.

In the middle of all this, as the cup cooled in my hand, you shared about your lives; your work, your families, your frustrations and your deep joys. You told me what you really thought of the sermon, or what you thought the church could do better.

I looked into your face when you admitted that the scans came back, and they were not good; that you don't know what your son could possibly be thinking; and that you aren't sure mom can keep living on her own.

All the while you kept coming back, Sunday after Sunday, to share in our common life together, bearing witness to God's persistent and unyielding love. Your faces have been missed in this place.

In this long and confusing season, we have been the church in diaspora. We will soon be regathered. It will be a welcome return, but it will be impartial at first. We will need to take our time feeling our way back to normalcy.

But don't worry, when the time is right, I'll brew a fresh pot, for all of us. Amen.