

Season after Pentecost - First John (Week 1)

July 14/15, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: John 1:1-4; I John 1: 1-4

Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many would say that most of us are romantics at heart. They don't mean the romantic of the Hallmark station or Valentine Day's expression of love. They mean romantic as the tendency to idealize, to carry around in us an expectation that is often perfection rather than reality. Examples? Those who think church is a place where everyone acts perfectly nice, all toddlers are perfectly innocent and "if you loved me, you would know what I'm thinking or feeling without my telling you." We often may not even realize that we are carrying this idea of the perfect parent, child, spouse, marriage, family, neighbor, church, until that person or group disappoints us with our very human failures and frailties. People and life are so much more messy and complex than our romanticism.

We are especially susceptible to romanticize the past. Faced with current changes, challenges and problems, we can often find ourselves looking to the past with deep longing, remembering that all seemed easier, kinder, simpler, better. Of course, we usually don't remember the unpleasant parts of that past nor that it wasn't that way for everyone. There is a tendency to extend our romantic lenses to the first century of Christianity. Indeed, it was an exciting period with the Spirit inspiring active discipleship and rapid growth. But if we imagine those new followers of Jesus lived in perfect harmony and unity, we'd be letting our romanticism get the better of us. Most of the letters included in the New Testament address, in part, the

strife and divisions over differences. This First Letter of John will give testimony to that.

In the coming weeks we will look at some of the dissension that seemed to be threatening the community First John is addressing. It seems there was disagreement “about the person of Jesus and the nature of the Christian life...Dissenters denied that Jesus was really human. They believed they followed the model of a spiritual Christ... The writer of I John wrote this letter to ‘set the record straight.’”¹ He and his community want it clear that the word of God was embodied in real, live human flesh in Jesus. They want the readers to know that in Jesus there is communion with God and one another. They believe the flesh and blood followers of Jesus are to embody Jesus in their own lives and their living. We do not know for certain who wrote First John — whom we will call “The Elder” — but we do know he and his community were steeped in the faith as expressed in the gospel of John. And they were passionate about Jesus and sharing the good news of Christ.

First John begins at “the beginning.” Not the beginning of all time but the beginning of God’s Word taking flesh in Jesus, to be among, with and for us. The Elder writing First John is clear that they heard, saw and even touched Jesus. Jesus was real, not just a spiritualized ideal. His life, death and resurrection are not the product of someone’s imagination. Jesus — the very life and word of God — became flesh, walked on this earth, shared our humanity to reveal God and eternal life. He became real flesh and blood so that we could be united with the Father and

with his Son Jesus Christ and one another. Jesus is NOT a romantic notion but God in flesh.

This is what is being stressed in the opening verses of First John. We, like the original audience of this writing, are to take stock of our own understanding of Jesus. Do you, do I believe Jesus walked this earth as the life and word of God, enfleshed in a human being? Or do we put Jesus in the clouds, in a nicely illustrated children's bible, in a spiritualize showcase of our imagination? Why stress Jesus in human flesh, here on earth? Because the same Lord who came to earth and dwelt among us is still made present to those who did not hear, see or touch him. How else could you explain millions of people coming to believe in Jesus — Son of God, Savior, Risen Lord — though they did not actually hear, see or touch the human body of Jesus? We may not be able to explain "how," yet we know it's true. Jesus is still enfleshed, still made real, accessible, and present in the Word, Baptism, Communion, worship and in communities of believers. "We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." The joy the Elder and his community know in communion with God and Christ is somehow even more whole when they share the Jesus they know and the Lord who is in, through and for them. The Word and life of God has been embodied in Jesus. We, his followers in the flesh are to embody Jesus and the Word in our lives and church.

On Thursday I traveled to Baltimore to attend a memorial service for Father Richard Kuhn. He was a 90 years old when he died. He had been a priest and member of the Marianist Order for 70 years. The Marianist Order is an international

community of priests and brothers who sponsor universities and secondary schools, as well as parishes and retreat centers. Their ministries focus on education, spiritual formation and social justice. I met Father Richard when I was in high school. He taught at Cardinal Gibbons, the all boy high school that was next door to my all girl high school, Archbishop Keough. He was one of the adult advisers for a group called Encounter for Christian Leadership that involved several Catholic high schools. We went to the Marianist Retreat house in Cape May, New Jersey twice a year and met regularly for service projects and worship.

Father Richard was the first approachable priest I had ever met. He was strong but gentle. His faith was powerful but never authoritarian. He was not judgmental and very patient — which is how he survived classrooms of teenage boys for so many years. He could be serious but he also knew how to laugh. He was ever so wise but had endearing quirkiness. He smiled often and it extended to a shine in his eyes. A factoid that has nothing to do with anything — Father Richard was the first priest I saw in a swimsuit. No Speedo or anything but startling, all the same, for a teenage Catholic girl.

Before the Memorial mass began, there was time for people to share memories about Father Richard. Quite a few spoke. Many were Marianist who had worked or lived with Father Richard. Others had met him on retreats and stayed in touch. Others, like myself, were students who had memories of the priest who touched our lives and shaped our faith with his tender kindness and profound love of God. When all was said and done, it came down to this. We each had met Jesus

in Richard. He had shown us the compassionate care and unconditional love of God. He embodied it in all he said and did. Jesus was no theoretical or abstract notion to Richard. Jesus was real to him. Jesus was present in Scripture, communion, religious community and serving others — like Jesus is to us — and Father Richard actively absorbed, pursued, and loved Jesus. In doing so, Jesus came to be embodied in Father Richard Kuhn, the saint but sinner, whose joy was made complete in quietly, consistently, sharing Jesus with others.

In the gospel of John we read, The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.” The miracle and calling of our faith is that Jesus, the Word made flesh, still comes to be “in flesh” in his followers, like Father Richard and others you have known that showed you Jesus in their lives. One of the holy labors of our faith and church is to actively, purposefully hear, see and touch Jesus not only in this place, but also outside these walls, in those who cross our path day in and day out. That is no romantic notion. It is not easy. But empowered by the Spirit, we are set free for our sacred calling ---- to be the Good News of Jesus walking, talking and touching others so they can know Jesus, too.

Linda M Alessandri 7/14/18

ENDNOTE

1. Nijay Gupta, “Commentary on 1 John 1:1 - 2:2” as posted on www.workingpreacher.org