

Season after Pentecost - First John (Week 2)

July 21/22, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: John 1:29; I John 1:5- 2:2

“Honest to God”

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

Would you rather try to find something in your attic or basement in total darkness or with the lights on? I can just hear boxes tumbling if you choose the dark. Would you rather try to navigate your way to the bathroom in a strange house in darkness or light? If darkness, I can hear a few choice words when you stub your toe or walk into a wall. Is it easier to wake up when it's light outside or when it is dark? Science says we feel more rested when we wake up in natural light. Would you like to read a book without light or with it? Unless you read braille, I don't even know how reading in total darkness is even possible. Light is not only a convenience but a necessity. Without light human and plant life cannot thrive. If I'm going to be fair in this analogy, darkness has its place when it's time to sleep or watch a movie on the big screen or when you want to get a good view of the stars. In general, the darkness contains dangers ... darkness is where things are not readily detected ...darkness is what you seek if you're trying hide something you don't want others to know.

“God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.” The writer of First John takes this human experience of light to describe God. This light that is God is not sunshine but truth. In God is all truth. Not half-truths, convenient interpretations, fake news or a single fib. By nature and as Creator, God is truth. In God, there are no lies. Which is why the psalmist wrote, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” When we seek to know the truth about life and living, right and

wrong we turn to God, revealed in scripture and the Word made flesh, Jesus.

“Honest to God” — that’s the truth.

Do you remember that story you heard long ago? The one about a man and woman who lived in Eden, a place where everything was in perfect harmony with God and one another. God told them the truth — all and everything was available to them but eating of one of particular trees was not good for them and thus forbidden. It was a truth from God who created and loved them. They ate of the forbidden tree anyway. They stepped out of God’s light into darkness and suddenly they were ashamed and hid. When asked, they stepped further into the darkness, blaming one another, a tempter snake and even God’s own self for the transgression. Some may call this a story about how sin came into the world. I would say it is a story that describes how sin is a part of our free will, human nature. It is a story of how humans, from the beginning of time, have tried to made up their own version of the truth that allows them to do what THEY want to do —God and truth be hanged. It is a story that tells how humans make choices to live in shadows and darkness rather than the light and truth of God because we find it easier and less restrictive. We are Adam and Eve and sin is a part of our brokenness. Or, as the author of First John says, “If we say that we have fellowship with God while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true.”

Sin is not a popular topic. Sin is often dismissed. “People are basically good,” you hear, which I want to believe too. After all, we are made in the image of God. But that does not negate the truth we read in Scripture and hear from Jesus. In our broken humanness, we also carry the tendency to sin ---- we battle with the

inclination to turn from God and neighbor for our own sake. It's a battle we wage our whole lives, baptized or not. That is sin. "If we say we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

It seems some of the people in the church the Elder was addressing in First John thought otherwise. They thought sin — a condition of human brokenness — was something erased by baptism and gone forever. Such thinking is the door to self-righteousness and rationalization of wrongdoing. The power of sin to permanently separate us from God **was and is** broken through Jesus and declared at our baptism. But the inclination to sin in thought, word and deed when it suits us, remains. To deny that is to walk in darkness. To think you are "above" sin is not only wrong but also dangerous to oneself and others. It's a set-up excuse for following your own version of truth rather than God's. It's a recipe for a self-righteous, unloving church that turns people away from God, Christ and the church.

While the human condition of sin is debated, the individual thoughts, words and actions we call sins (with an "s" at the end) are also challenged and downplayed. It is popular to call sin just "mistakes." I'd say putting salt rather than sugar in a recipe is a mistake. I'd say putting an appointment on the wrong day in my calendar is a mistake. When we don't love the Lord our God with all our life and we don't love our neighbor as yourself that is sin. It is not an unintentional error, it's a choice we make --- unwisely perhaps, uninformed perhaps, unaware of all the consequences perhaps — but a willful decision that does not express love of God or neighbor. Those are sins, not innocent errors. "If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar, and God's word is not in us."

“Sin” is a part of our humanness. “Sins” are the ways our sinful nature is enacted. If that was the end of the story, the world and we would be doomed to darkness and despair, doomed to be separated from God and one another. But it’s not the end of the story. “If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Jesus taught us to open our lives to the light of God so that our sin and sins may be exposed. That was not the advice of a mean, condemning judge speaking. It was the teaching of a loving, wise healer and teacher. Talking and thinking about sin is not about making people feel guilty. It’s about healing wounds and restoring relationships in our families, communities, world and within ourselves. Sins and “Sin decays our life and pollutes our relationship with God”¹ and one another.

When we become aware of our sinfulness and turn toward God for forgiveness, we let the light in. We know we will be met by a gracious, forgiving Lord. A Lord who wants to free us of burdens. A Lord who can give us the courage to own up to our sins and try to make things right. God’s forgiveness gives us a fresh start, freeing us to try yet again to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbor as ourselves. God’s grace empowers us to do battle against the sin within ourselves that just gets in the way of God and love. “But if we walk in the light as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.”

We are sinners. That is the truth. It is treacherous to deny or ignore it. On this side of eternity, we will continually need to battle against sin as we try to live faithfully. That is the truth, otherwise, why would we need a Savior? God loves us

totally, perfectly, unconditionally and forever, even the sinners we are. That is the truth, too. Each day, with all its actions, words and thoughts, we must choose. Do we live in the light of God or do we keep to the shadows and darkness of our sinful human nature? Do we follow God's truth or keep making up our own? There's a war between the light and truth of God and the darkness, lies, and part-truths of a self-serving, I-me-mine way of the world. That war is all around us and it is also inside of us. Which side will we take?

If it was only a matter of our will, we'd be doomed. "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." (John 26:41) But we're not on our own. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." God the truth is with us, made known in the Bible, Jesus and the church. Jesus is right beside us on the path of light, in the meal we will soon receive. The Holy Spirit sheds light and gives us power to see and follow it.

This afternoon/morning we will offer our confession and seek forgiveness. In these coming moments for reflection, practice letting God's light into dark corners. Be ready for Christ's forgiveness to clean out the dirt that gets in the way. Then, grab hold of God's promises and love to try again to freely live and love in the light.

(The order of "Confession and Forgiveness to follow the sermon and silence.)

Linda M Alessandri 7/21/2018

ENDNOTE

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1. Nijay Gupta, "Commentary on 1 John 1:1-2:2" as posted on www.workingpracher.org