

1John 1:1-2:2 - Pentecost 6

Living in the Light

Although 1John is called a letter it neither begins nor ends as such. And yet no work was ever more clearly addressed to a definite community by an author who knew intimately and loved passionately those to whom he wrote. 1John is more of a homily than a letter, and it was written by one in whose heart the pastoral instinct was dominant above all other things. The writer may or may not have been a theologian. Undoubtedly he was the pastor of his flock. His chief interest is the care of souls. The writer is not dealing with abstractions but with life and living persons.

1John is a treatise that was written by an unknown author in language similar to that used in John's gospel. John's Gospel gives all the appearances of being historical narrative riding on a cushion of theology, while 1John seems to be an extended sermon, deriving themes from the mother work but making its own way theologically. And so the author of 1John is called "John." He is worried that his readers will be led astray by community members who have split off from the group. The Christian community had suffered a schism. As serious as those fissures were, however, they were not so openly inflammatory as those within the Corinthian congregation. That is, the issues were not over leadership or such matters as abuses of the Lord's supper.

These texts from 1 John contain a continuous proclamation to an assumed congregation. He was writing at a time when the enemy was within the gates and when the Church was threatened from within. The danger did not come from persecution or from any threat from outside the Church. It came from mistaken teachers who had been within the Church, although now they have seceded from the Church. It seems that the congregation perceived itself as being faithful to the received tradition, though that same body of believers was apparently beset by varied, perhaps even heretical, opinions from within.

The issues in this Johannine community were primarily christological—that is, the texts deal with divergent views, even secessionist views, about the person of Jesus. There is also some concern in the community about behaviour, about eschatology, and about the role of the Spirit.

John cited personal experience and appealed to empirical evidence to support the humanity of Jesus Christ. Some false teachers denied his humanity. Extreme Docetism held that Jesus was not human at all but was merely a prolonged theophany, while moderate Docetism, considered Jesus the natural son of Joseph and Mary upon whom the Spirit came at the time of baptism. Specific instances of personal encounter with Jesus Christ had left a continuing impression on John.

1 John re-proclaims the message of John's gospel in a changed context. The gospel recognized that both Jesus' followers and his foes agreed that he was human, but not everyone could see God's work being revealed in him. So the gospel emphasized the divine side of his identity. 1 John, however, speaks to a context in which some have taken that emphasis too far, and saw Jesus only in spiritual terms. So the epistle emphasizes Jesus' humanity.

Most people today would agree that Jesus was human, yet may have trouble with the particularity of that claim. They may find it plausible to think of Jesus as an expression of spiritual or ethical ideals, but have difficulty with the particulars of his life, crucifixion, and resurrection. So 1 John focuses on the embodied word of God, and calls for an embodied faith.

Even though all the parties in this community seem to be acquainted with John's Gospel, the divergent views were disturbing enough to cause the writer of 1 John to have to frame and defend his views repeatedly, if not repetitiously. In the beginning of 1 John there are noticeable echoes of the first chapter of John's Gospel. The declaration here reaches back to the beginning, just as it does in John. The word of life, namely God's Son Jesus Christ, is the revealed source of life, the one who is to be proclaimed.

This word is not disembodied; it is a tangible word, one that has been heard and seen and touched with the hands. The fact that this message has to be declared with an appeal to some received authority – (“what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands”) suggests that there are some things in the community that need to be clarified and set straight.

The truth that is being proclaimed requires ongoing and faithful testimony. The message must be proclaimed; it is not a private matter, something to be hoarded or kept under wraps. It is audible, visible, tangible truth, reaching back to the beginning of time. While the message is flexible, it is not polymorphous (passing through many different forms or stages). That is, God’s revealed word is not something that can be forced to assume any shape, depending on the prevailing fad or fancy. The message has important consequences in the life of the community. The Community is expected to listen, act, and then to testify to what they know about this word of life, a word that makes an ultimate claim.

This received and revealed truth performs the dual function of bringing about fellowship among the members of the gathered body and fellowship with God. It seems, though, that this dual fellowship in the community of 1 John was in some kind of trouble; divergent views were undermining the life and teaching of the community.

The four verses of the first chapter function as a prologue to the whole book - similar to the prologue of the Gospel of John - and bolsters the author’s subsequent argument by claiming a first-hand experience of God’s revelations: “We declare to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life.”

John’s epistle is essentially concerned with the gospel proclaimed by the apostles. In a sense, he asks the question: What is the Gospel and why was

it proclaimed? Any community that confesses one thing and acts in a contrary manner is deceiving itself. If people know that God is light, yet act in shadowy ways, they undermine the very truth to which they testify. How can we have fellowship with God, who is light, while waking in darkness? How can we say we have no sin when we are sinners? We lie if we do these things, and the truth, which we confess, is not in us. By denying that we are sinners, not only are we liars, but we make God out to be a liar as well.

For many it is: “Jesus came so that I’ll live forever.” In the Gospels, however, Jesus never promises that he will be crucified and his disciples will be the risen ones. Such self-centeredness makes us deaf to a keynote that is: the capacity of the risen Christ to draw individuals into authentic life together. Today’s reading is a candid yet encouraging meditation on life in a community whose Lord is Jesus.

The opening line of the gospel spoke of “the Word” that created all things in “the beginning,” and the epistle shifts the focus to the “Word of Life” as the Christian message, which finds its “beginning” in the incarnation. The point of the message is to create fellowship or “*koinonia*” between God and people, and among people themselves.

John’s opening plays a riff on the Fourth Gospel’s first verses. Notice their similar language: the Word or “the word of life” that was “in” or “from the beginning;” a life made manifest and testified to; the intimacy of God the Father with his Son Jesus Christ; the proclamation of the Word; or of God as light unquenched by darkness.

In contrast, the distinctive contributions of the first four verses of 1 John are to draw at least two things out of John’s background and set them centre stage. First, the Gospel highlights Christ’s divine glory, assuming his incarnation. 1 John reverses the polarity by repeatedly stressing the sensory character of “the eternal life that was with the Father and made manifest to us:” “what we have seen with our own eyes, and we have beheld and

touched with our own hands.”

1John’s other apparent concern is the importance of genuine fellowship (*koinonia*) “with us” and “with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. In a way this theme of community, seems to continue from the ten commandments we had looked at in our Bible study a couple of months ago.

The essence of fellowship is increasing intimacy. Our fellowship with God must involve drawing closer to him and viewing him more intently all the time to be genuine fellowship. The same is true of fellowship on the human level. In similar terms, this is 1John’s theme throughout: the coherence of the church with God’s love expressed in Jesus Christ. The author writes with heartfelt hope that “our joy may be consumed.”

In the first two verses of John’s Gospel, John along with the other apostles, saw, touched and heard the divine “life.” This “life” is present in God’s revelation, in his Word, and was operative long before the creation of the universe. This Word became flesh in the birth of Jesus. So, the divine “life” was present in Jesus and in him they saw, touched and heard it. All who hear the Word (the gospel) and believe it, similarly possess the divine life - “eternal life.”

1 John chooses to describe eternal life in the terms of fellowship with God. The same idea is found in Jesus’ words recorded in the Gospel, “this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” The word “fellowship” is best imaged in the intimacy of marriage, so “fellowship with the Father and his Son” involves a living and eternal union with God in Christ.

This intimate union with the divine is also mutually shared between believers. The divine life makes us family. The author warns against those who deny that Jesus Christ came in the flesh repeating that those who love God must love other Christians. John said he wrote so his readers would enjoy the

fellowship with God that is possible only to those who have seen him. This fellowship rests on the reality of Jesus Christ's incarnation, and it results in full joy for those who experience it.

John wrote so they could enter into and continue to enjoy the intimate fellowship with Him – that the apostolic eyewitnesses enjoyed. The purpose of the Epistle: 'that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.' "The main theme of the Epistle is fellowship with God." "Here we are given, without any hesitation, a description of the Christian life; here, indeed, is the whole object, the ultimate, the goal of all Christian experience and all Christian endeavour. This, beyond any question, is the central message of the Christian gospel and of the Christian faith."

If we were to boil down the message of this epistle into one sentence it would be this: "Fellowship with God is the essence of eternal life." John wrote this epistle to enable believers to appreciate our "fellowship with God," and he wrote to deepen that fellowship.

The Gospel was written so that his readers might believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that believing they might have life through His name. John wrote this epistle to Christians so that they could "have fellowship" with the apostles, with God the Father, and with Jesus Christ. He wrote that we might enter into the fullness of the eternal life that we possess. However, the subject of this epistle is not eternal life but fellowship with God. *Fellowship with God* is the essence of eternal life.

In the end, the writer of 1John owns up to his motivations: he seeks to protect his "little children" from sinning. But like a loving parent, he hastens to add that even if his little children DO sin, there is no better advocate than the one we have: Jesus Christ the righteous. He focuses on the embodied word of God and calls for an embodied faith. The recognition of the disconnect between our hopes for ourselves as followers of Jesus - and our

behaviour in everyday life is a critical part of coming to maturity in faith. 1John invites us to this recognition gently by encouraging us and emphasizing the job of restoration to relationship and fresh starts.

Amen.

PRAYERS for PENTECOST 6 SUNDAY - JUNE 30, 2024

Centre us now, O God, on your presence in this place among your people, as we lift up our hearts' desires, our souls' deep longings and needs, our hungers, fears and failures. Be near to us in our weakness and uphold us with your strength and grace as we pray.

We pray for those who find the strain of life too much to bear; for those who feel overwhelmed or in a rut; for those who are over-reliant on themselves who try to 'go it alone'; for those who are slowing down through illness or through increasing years; for those oversensitive to criticism; for those who are overworked and underpaid; for those who are unappreciated, bullied and abused; for all who are worn down in body or in mind by the burdens which they carry.

Give your help and guidance, to all whose work affects the lives of others. Give wisdom and integrity to our leaders. Bless and strengthen the bonds of family life. Teach us how to understand one another better: parents and children; partners in committed relationships - to invest in our loved ones through deeper compassion and understanding, thereby deepening our love for one another.

We pray for those who are facing illness, medical treatments and therapies, life-altering diagnoses and prolonged healing, and who at times feel lost and look to you for hope, comfort, and peace.

We pray and are grateful for our church and its leaders: Bishop Kathy and Bishop Susan, newly elected Bishops Pr. Trish Schmermund of the Alberta and Territories Synod; Bishop Rev. Dr. Ali Tote of the Saskatchewan Synod, and Bishop Pr. Jason Zinko of the Manitoba Synod; for all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers. Bless their ministries.

Creating God, you know your Creation well and love all you have made. We pray for equity and the even distribution of the earth's abundance. Specifically, we pray for the preservation of the important canopy of trees that cover our landscape, beautify our homes, purify our air and provide homes for animals of all kinds, including humans. We pray for firefighters, wildlife, and all who are affected by wildfires.

Let us pray for all nations and communities who live with deep divisions, internal conflicts, increased polarization, misinformation, armed conflict, and climate crisis. This year, the largest global election year in history, more than 2 billion people across over 60 countries either have voted or will be voting. Grant that all civil authorities may work towards justice and peace and the common good of all. Give them wisdom to attend to the needs of all, especially the vulnerable.

Let us pray for our local Christian communities, our churches and ecumenical groups; for those here present, and those who are absent today. We lift up Benediction Lutheran Church in Delta, King of Life Lutheran Church in Coquitlam and Pastor Dorothy Chu, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

Naming God, you know us by name and call us by name. Be with all people yet to come out to colleagues, friends, family and themselves with some aspect of their gender or sexual identity. Support those who are questioning, struggling with, discerning, or discovering their identity. Help us to be the friends and allies that we wish to see in the world, offering supportive guidance on the journey of self discovery. May we affirm that all are beloved and treasured in your eyes.

Even as we sing, even as we pray, loving God, our thoughts turn to those for whom home has become an uncertain and unsafe place, for whom 'home' is but a hope-filled dream. For those of us who know this place of safety and comfort, our minds strain to comprehend what its loss means to so many, and so we turn our thoughts and hearts and hope to them this day.

We pray for the people of Syria, Ukraine, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Gaza, where so many have been forced from their homes and the lives they have known, only to become homeless refugees in strange and often hostile places.

Faithful God, your power and your righteousness reach the heavens. Hear us, your servants, as we follow you to the day when faith, hope, and love will be upon the lips of all of us, your children. These things we pray in the name of your Son who taught us to pray.....

Our Father ...