

“The Treason of Images (*This is not a fellowship*)”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

1 John 1:1-2:2

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Fifth Sunday of Easter

Little is known directly about the author of 1, 2, and 3 John, but these letters seem to be written by the same person, only identified as “the elder.” They were traditionally attributed to John the disciple, as was the Gospel of John, and the name stuck. Scholars now think the gospel was written about seventy years after the crucifixion, and the letters by a different writer, a little bit later.

Between the writing of the gospel and the composition of the letters of John, something has happened to the community to which the elder is writing. It appears that some folks have split from the body due to a disagreement about the understanding of Jesus and how to live as his followers. These dissenters were in some way denying that that Jesus was really human, or that at least his humanity was irrelevant. They saw him as a wholly spiritual Christ, sinless and heavenly, and that they could live such sinless spiritual lives. In response to that, we get some news from the elder who writes this letter. Listen for God’s word to us from 1 John:

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— this 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— we 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. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in God there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with God while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, God’s Son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If 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; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

You can hear the emphasis on having touched and heard and seen this truth — the word of life and light. We're not talking about vague theological concepts here, the elder is clear. This is real. And known. And audible and visible and tangible. The organizing principle of this community is not some ethereal dream. It's not a flowy *what*, but a corporeal *who*. It is based in incarnation — in hands and feet and sweat and blood and bread and water and dirt and breath and flesh. It's based in matter, and matter matters, and so don't listen to anyone who tells you that Jesus's humanity isn't crucial and that the way we walk in this life isn't part of our relationship with God.

The writer of this letter wants the truth contained in it to be received and understood for two named reasons: fellowship and joy, with the joy flowing from the realization of fellowship. "Fellowship" has become one of those weird church words, like "narthex" or "paraclete." And it's lost a bit of its meaning. "Fellowship" brings to mind coffee and doughnuts, and plastic tablecloths, and hanging out.

And fellowship is those things, but so much more. The New Testament definition is more vivid and vital. It's one of those Greek words for which we can't quite find an equivalent. The word is *koinonia*, and it pops up all over the Epistles. It's used to talk about the sharing of resources and living in community, and how God, Christ, and the Spirit live together, and about knowing Christ's suffering. It's fellowship, but closer to *The Fellowship of the Ring* than polite conversation over pastries. *Koinonia* is about being bound together in community for a purpose. It is what we strive to be with one another, and with God. *Koinonia* fellowship within the church and with the triune God is sacred and life-giving and centered on love.

And of course if that's what we're being offered, that's what we want. But it puts demands on us, and on God. *Koinonia* fellowship isn't like a book club, where you can get by without having read the chapter if you bring a decent bottle of wine. It's not a loose association of like-minded people. It requires an embodied faith, this bond. And when humans try to live out anything, including our faith, we're going to make mistakes. It's part of who we are with limits on our bodies and our brains and patience.

We are earthly. So we mess up in our pursuit of fellowship with God and one another. And the call from this letter is to be honest about who we are and how we are and to receive forgiveness in the grace of God through Christ. I hope this sounds familiar, as we just did such a confession a few minutes ago. We do it every week. It's one of the things that makes us Presbyterian. Confession and forgiveness are to a Presbyterian Church worship service as the coin toss and marching band are to a college football game. It's not about walking around with heavy guilt. It's about being truthful about how we exist in the world in pursuit of this weird and wonderful kind of fellowship.

The elder who wrote this letter wants us to hear loud and clear that we cannot do what these dissenters are doing, dressing everything up as hyper-holy and pretending there's no stumbling and no need for

forgiveness. To do so is only kidding yourself. With these amazing, creative brains we have, we're quite adept at telling ourselves a really good story to justify our behavior.

We're so good at creating these self-deceptions, we even joke about it sometimes. How often have you heard the zinger "Oh, these calories don't count!"? We laugh, knowing fully that the joke is on us *because that's not how science works*. We don't laugh when the stakes are bigger, when we justify cruelty or selfishness or declaring someone to be outside the circle of God's love. We don't share a knowing grin when we make our peace with violence. We don't chuckle and say "Oh, those lives don't matter!" and we get really upset if anyone asks us if that's what we mean. We don't laugh. Yet the joke is still on us.

The tendency toward self-deception — toward scrubbing away our own sin as if we're editing our life to show as a movie on an airplane — is ultimately destructive. It creates separation between us and ourselves and our neighbors and our God. It's poison to *koinonia* and joy. We can paint a picture of fellowship and get by for awhile, but authentic *koinonia* comes from truth telling.

I work the New York Times Crossword Puzzle almost every day. I could tell you that I always do the puzzle in ink and solve every clue every time, but then the truth would not be in me and I would not be walking in the light. Just yesterday the clue for 1-Across was "Like a world in which objective facts are less important than appeals to emotion and personal belief" — nine letters. The answer, which took a little help from some shorter Down clues to suss out, was "post-truth."

And it's not just presidents and politicians and cable pundits trying to convince us that truth is overrated. I teased my mom this week for being one of those people on social media who posts blurry pictures and non-flattering selfies as if they just picked up their iPhone from Walgreen's and got home and said, "Tsk, tsk, well, I guess these photographs just didn't come out perfectly. But what can you do?" She's doing Facebook wrong! Someone needs to tell my mom that you have to work hard to cultivate your online truth. You're supposed to take at least a half-dozen selfies to make sure you had good lighting and your eyes were opened and your smile didn't come out unintentionally crooked. And you're supposed to snap a pic of your living room real quick after you've tidied it up and pretend that's how it always looks. Same thing with your family.

Telling the truth about ourselves is yet another of those annoying, weird things that following Christ calls us to do. I know I've said this before, but I give thanks to God every single day for calling me to a church community that takes Jesus more seriously than it takes itself. Churches always want a pastor with a decent sense of humor. But I really think it's more important going the other way. Thank you for your ability to laugh at yourselves and to be as honest as you are with one another.

Living post-truth leads to a false fellowship that falls short of *koinonia* and short of joy and short of the glory of God. A community can find thousands of stock images to put on its website that scream "community" and "faith" and "love" and "grace" and "care." You can even work "fellowship" into your name. But a photograph of *koinonia* is not *koinonia*. We are not a church because we have stained

glass windows, or crosses, or a giant white Jesus window, or because we pay someone to wear a funny robe.

We become the church when we tell the truth about who we are. When we admit that we are broken. When we are honest: we get snippy once in awhile, we get high and mighty from time to time, we sometimes want to sleep in on Sunday, some of cuss quite a bit, and we always know we could do more. We become the church when we tell the truth about Jesus, who did, in fact, seek out those on the edges and feed those who were being ignored and teach nonviolence and radical hospitality.

When we fail to do our best we are called not to hide in the shadows, but to walk in the light and find the guts to accept forgiveness. The real *koinonia* we seek here is not about cultivating an image or being holier than anyone, but about being a church of quirky beloveds who love one another and show up for one another when crud is raining down and stick our necks out for one another and work together to stick the collective neck out for those beyond these walls who need love.

We are called to strive for real fellowship, not its profile picture. We are not prim and proper here and some of us love that and some of us love this community in spite of it. We are habitually late, and those of us who aren't decided long ago that we were in the minority and this community is worth it anyway. We — okay I — sometimes need to be reminded to step down off the soapbox. We sometimes need to be reminded to shout louder about the world's brokenness.

So it seems the good news for today is that EPC is closer to the *koinonia* fellowship of love incarnate that John's letters celebrate than to self-deceiving people who make God a liar. Congratulations! But let this not be an autopsy but a diagnosis. You are *koinonia* people. The side-effects are many and most of them are glorious. Some of them are challenging. All of them are life-giving. May you, in your lives and your church life, spread this *koinonia* to extend the web of fellowship with God and one another that you have discovered in Christ incarnate. Stay true to your embodied faith and stay faithful to your embodied truth, so that your joy may be complete.

Amen.