

***A Paraclete for Our Sins***  
**A Sermon on 1 John 1:1-2:2**  
**Second Sunday of Easter**  
**April 8, 2018**

## **Introduction**

For the next six weeks, Mary, Cece and I are going to preach about 1 John. I have never studied 1 John or preached on it. It has some beautiful verses on love. It is the only place in the New Testament that says, “God is love.” 1 John 4:19 is one of my favorite verses: “We love because God first loved us.”

Parts of 1 John are offensive at first reading. There has recently been a church split, and the author calls some of the members who left liars and anti-Christ. 1 John seems very tribal. The focus is totally on the church.

That is characteristic of the epistles. The gospels talk about the ministry and death of Jesus. The epistles talk about how the early followers of Jesus became church.

The topic that is at the forefront of today’s text is sin: how do we deal with any sins we commit after our baptism and what role does Jesus play in purifying us from our sins?

## **First Move: A Church Split**

The author of 1 John does not identify himself. He is probably *not* the same person as the author of the Gospel of John, but he does come out of the same community. It is the community that formed around the beloved disciple, whom Christian tradition identifies as the disciple John. The Johannine community gravitated to the area around Ephesus. 1 John uses much of the same language as in the Gospel of John. It is probably written at least 10 years later, in the early second century.

1 John takes place immediately after a church split. A group had just left the Johannine community. We are not sure exactly what the disagreement was about; we have only a few verses in 1 John that suggest what some of their beliefs were.

The traditional view of scholars is that those who left were docetists, which is based on the Greek word, δοκέω, which means, “to seem.” They emphasized the divinity of Christ. He came down from heaven, took the form of human flesh for

a little while, then returned to heaven. He was fully divine, he only *seemed* to be human.

Recent scholarship suggests that may be unfair to the group who left. Raymond Brown, one of the leading scholars on John in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, calls them secessionists, and I also will refer to them as secessionists. They left because of differences in beliefs and practices, but we should be careful about speculating exactly what they thought since none of their writings survive. We learn about them only through the lens of their opponent, the author of 1 John.

1 John is unusual for a letter. It does not have a greeting or a closing. Instead it has a prologue that seems to be interpreting the prologue to the Gospel of John.

The author is writing to people in his own community. He appears to be concerned that some of those who have remained will be influenced by the teaching of the secessionists. He often uses the plural “we” to demonstrate that he speaks for the elders in the community, those who interpret gospel for the community, especially the gospel as proclaimed by John.

The emphasis in the first verse is on Jesus in the flesh. We have heard him and seen him with our own eyes and felt him with our hands.

The secessionists apparently did not place much importance on the earthly ministry of Jesus. The author believes that the earthly ministry is central; it revealed what eternal life is like. Eternal life is *κοινωνία* with the father and the son. *Κοινωνία* is often translated as fellowship. Its root meaning is sharing. I prefer to translate it as communion. Eternal life means communion with God and Jesus right here and now, in this life. Eternal life is a shared life with God and Jesus. Father and Son language emphasizes a close, personal relationship.

Communion with God is not described as a mystical experience. It is life that is shared with others in the community. Loving others, as Jesus loved us.

The author says that *we* already enjoy communion with Father and Son. He urges those who are tempted by the secessionists to enter into communion with us, so that they also might enjoy communion with God and Jesus. This is the beginning of a movement toward apostolic succession, which sees the church as the proper channel for interpreting the gospel.

The message that we, the elders, heard from Jesus is that “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.” This sharp distinction between light and dark reflects the dualism of the intertestamental period, when apocalyptic eschatology was dominant. Most of the Old Testament was not so black and white. Ancient Israel believed that God had a dark, mysterious side that humans could not understand. In

the intertestamental period, Satan took on a larger role. Darkness was viewed as coming from Satan and light from God.

When Jesus came into the world, he revealed the light. Those who believed in him came out of the darkness of a world that was dominated by Satan.

The author tries to demonstrate that the secessionists continue to walk in darkness, while we, the elders of the Johannine community, are walking in the light. He sets out six boasts that the secessionists made.

Apparently the secessionists did not take the reality of sin seriously enough. In the author's view, the secessionists believed that they were no longer capable of sin once they came into the light and confessed their belief in Jesus. By coming out of the darkness, their sins were forgiven. The secessionists do not appreciate that even the believers in Jesus have an ongoing struggle with sin.

The author emphasizes that members of the believing community still need to acknowledge their sins. The author says that Jesus will act as a paraclete, or an intercessor with God on their behalf. He will be a conduit for God's mercy. God will pardon their sins and purify them of all unrighteousness.

## **Second Move: Forming a New Tribe**

When we hear this text today, it sounds very tribal. *We* are children of the light. Our opponents are children of darkness. *We* have communion with God and Jesus—they are still walking in darkness. They are liars and deceive themselves.

Those are harsh words and we should cringe when we hear them. We will temper our criticism when we remember that we are talking about the infancy of a new movement. Becoming followers of Jesus means that they are becoming part of a new tribe. People were just sorting out what it meant to be a follower of Jesus.

Humans are naturally tribal. We want to be in community with people like us. To be tribal means to have a common identity and a common history to draw on.

John's community was struggling with who Jesus was and how he made a difference in their lives. They were actually making Jesus the center of their lives and they were passionate about it.

The Gospel of John reflects a bitter conflict between John's community and the Jews. 1 John reflects a bitter conflict between the elders of John's community and the secessionists. They believe that the life of the movement is at stake. They are trying to keep the tribe together. They use harsh words against people who have left the tribe in hopes of persuading those still in the Johannine community to remain.

The early church is in the same stage of development as when Joseph and his brothers started forming a tribal consciousness and became the people of Israel. The

early church in the New Testament grows out of a sense of family. Jesus asks, “Who are my mother and my brother and my sister? Whoever does the will of God is my mother and my brother and my sister.” A new family is formed around Christ. We are brothers and sisters in Christ.

At this stage of development, bonding is more important than bridging. The social values of loyalty, authority and purity emerge at this level of consciousness.

A tribal consciousness is a necessary first step toward group formation, but there are many stages of group development beyond that. Bridging becomes important to keep a group from becoming hostile to other groups. Tribalism can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on whether the group evolves from bonding to bridging.

Even though today’s text says nasty things about the secessionists, it contains the seeds of bridging within it.

### **Third Move: Taking Sin Seriously**

1 John forces us to take the problem of sin seriously. “If we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

Evangelical Christians and mainline Christians both seem to be closer to the secessionists’ view of sin.

Evangelicals emphasize being born again, coming forward during an altar call to commit their lives to Jesus. They believe in sacrificial atonement—Jesus died on the cross for our sins. It was a one-time event that takes away original sin for those who believe in Jesus. They seem less concerned with any sins they commit after the altar call because they are already assured of going to heaven to be with Jesus.

Many Mainline Christians don’t believe in original sin or sacrificial atonement. They view them as doctrines from the past that no longer make sense. We don’t like to hear hymns about the blood of Jesus wiping away our sins. We do like to talk about the sins of the culture, but our own individual sins, not so much.

Faithful Christian life is a complicated balance and 1 John helps us strike that balance. Sin is real. We confess that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, but our actions don’t always measure up. We still struggle with violence. We struggle with hostility and indifference toward others. If we don’t confess our sins, we will project our sins onto other people. We call them judgmental and hypocritical. We need to take the log out of our own eyes first.

If we confess that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, he should have a place in helping us deal with our sins. Jesus is our paraclete with God. Παράκλητος in Greek means advocate, intercessor, mediator. A paraclete is our representative before God.

We don't need a paraclete because God is wrathful and wants to punish us—that is foreign to the thinking of 1 John. The paraclete is a conduit for God's mercy. The paraclete assures us that God will be merciful to us if only we are honest about ourselves. Jesus is the word made flesh. We know that God is merciful because Jesus is merciful. Jesus gives us confidence to confess our sins to God.

1 John says, "If we acknowledge our sins, he [God] who is faithful and just [will] pardon us [of] the sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." God recognizes that we are imperfect humans. We are trying to follow Jesus and we inevitably stumble along the way. Sin is a burden on our soul, and God frees us from that burden.

A tribe who confesses their own sins before they point out the sins of others is building a bridge to other tribes. We don't deceive ourselves that we are superior to other people. We don't deceive ourselves that we always are walking in the light—sometimes we are walking in the darkness.

Mainline Christians pride themselves on being tolerant and accepting. Sometimes we aren't. Sometimes we are just as partisan as anybody else. We deceive ourselves into believing that people who disagree with our politics are selfish or uneducated. We make fun of people who like NASCAR and WWE and guns. We call wealthy people privileged, uncaring elites. We are quick to accuse people of being racist or sexist. We are not interested in having an actual conversation with people we disagree with. We would rather shame them.

An evangelical couple built a bridge to our Wednesday night group. They are progressive members of the Church of Christ. A lot of people don't know that there is such a thing. They live nearby and came to meet with us Wednesday because they wanted to talk with other progressive Christians. They checked online and saw that we were open and affirming and that we had studied Richard Rohr.

They joined in and added to the conversation we were having about Neighborhood in Diana Butler Bass's book *Grounded*. That showed initiative and courage. How many of us would go to a discussion group at a Church of Christ?

They broke many of the stereotypes that we had about members of the Church of Christ. Their church has women preachers and women elders. They share many of our traditions--Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ both grew out of the Stone-Campbell movement. It gave me hope that the unity of all Christians may still be something we can hope for.

## **Conclusion**

Confessing our sins is not weakness. It is a sign of strength and spiritual maturity. It shows that we believe that Jesus has a role in our salvation. It shows that we have confidence in a God of mercy who helps us with our burdens.

Confessing our sins will help make us a tribe that reaches out instead of turning inward. Taking the log out of our eyes will open our hearts to people who turn out to be not so different from us after all.

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