

Fellowship of the Light

Acts 4: 32-35

1 John 1:1—2:2

We have an opportunity in the coming weeks before Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit to reflect on what it means to be *in* Christ, *about* Christ, yet *without* Christ physically among us.

The passage from the First Letter of John to the churches opens with a discussion of fellowship, a word that is repeated four times in the first chapter. Fellowship is one of those things that we tend to take for granted in the church. We're pretty sure it involves food, like Pot Luck, and talking, like we do a lot of before and after the worship service, and during a Pot Luck. We know that fellowship is important, but we may not appreciate how important it is. Is it important like communion? Is it important like a sermon? Is it important like coming out on a work day? Is it important like giving regularly to support the church, even when you're not able to attend? What kind of important is it? In fact, fellowship is central to the new body of Christ, the church.

Here is a quote from a book of Max Lucado's that describes the powerful dynamic that's released in fellowship and community. Start with a tough question. He wrote:

Questions can make hermits out of us, driving us into hiding. Yet the cave has no answers. Christ distributes courage through community; he dissipates doubts through fellowship. He never deposits all knowledge in one person but distributes pieces of the jigsaw puzzle to many. When you interlock your understanding with mine, and we share our discoveries, when we mix, mingle, confess, and pray, Christ speaks.

It's so helpful that Lucado brings in the imagery of the cave, the place of hiding from difficulties like tough questions, which is also a place of darkness as well as a place that provides no answers. Our scripture passage, being of the body of work attributed to "John," also embraces the contrasts of light and dark. For Lucado, too, the dark is not hospitable for the spirit of faith and fellowship.

In the darkness, we're alone. Even when we're with someone else, we're quite alone, quite vulnerable, quite anxious. John makes it clear that darkness is not where those faithful to Jesus can allow themselves to reside and find comfort and sanctuary.

Continuing with Lucado, he tells us how Jesus is in the light, and what we'll find in the fellowship in the light with him. He describes how Jesus *distributes courage through community*. Note that it isn't a matter of Jesus sprinkling courage fairy dust on a few people who thereby have the gift of courage. Listen again: *[Jesus] distributes courage through community*. In other words, courage take shape within the entire community of faith, within the fellowship of believers.

In the same way, he says that *[Jesus] dissipates doubts through fellowship*. The uncertainty, anxiety, and inertia that afflicts the lone individual finds its match in the

fellowship of the light as the community together finds the new strengths to move forward with purpose.

Lucado continues to describe how knowledge (but also faith, spiritual gifts, and other resources) is spread throughout the fellowship, only coming together and its strength realized when sharing occurs among minds and spirits that are engaged in seeking together. Again, he writes, *when we mix, mingle, confess, and pray, Christ speaks*. In short, Christ speaks in fellowship, Christ speaks in the light, Christ speaks when we open ourselves in welcoming others, appreciating the gifts they bring, and knowing that a healthy fellowship is entirely different from an exclusive club.

Still, for the earliest believers and the earliest congregations, exactly what this new way of faith in fellowship, in community, meant could be different from one teacher to another. Remember, that this letter was composed sometime in the late first century. There was very little that was defined as orthodox, proper, appropriate, and the like. Congregations spread among cities and towns around the greater Mediterranean relied on authoritative interpreters, teachers who would visit or communicate with the faith gatherings. However, not all teachers were necessarily helpful, something we've seen in Paul's letters to Corinth and to the Galatian churches, for example.

The writer of First John affirms right in the opening paragraph what is the authoritative tradition, emphasizing the first-hand account of the witness, saying: *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*. (You'll notice that this "letter" has no introduction and no closing, hence the many scholarly questions about whether this is truly a letter, or perhaps a sermon that was circulated like a letter.)

As we move further into the arguments, we see that there appears to be some question about sin and how it should be dealt with among the believers' community. A common way of understanding this would be to take the answer provided and flip it back into some likely semblance of the originating question. For example, verse 8 says, *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*. This may be answering the question of whether or not the community of new life has sin or not. It could be that a teacher has told them that they have been made new in Jesus Christ, and they no longer sin.

Verses 9 and 10 say: *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*. Again, it seems like the question concerns acknowledgement that, despite the new life in Christ, the believer is not made perfect, and does still sin, but has Christ who is advocate, the one whose blood cleanses from sin and all unrighteousness. To say, 'we have not sinned' is a lie, and we make Christ the liar, and Christ's word of life is not in us.

In this lesson from First John, we also see how the community of the faithful, the fellowship of the light, forms the effective witness of the body of Christ. The fellowship

of the light is to stand in stark contrast to the darkness, to the way that is not of Christ, not of love, grace, justice, or peace.

The way that is not of Christ has changed, and we can see it change even within the New Testament. We can recall Paul's bitter fight with Peter, recounted in the Letter to the Galatians, over the question of keeping Jewish dietary laws in the earliest Christian communities. As I shared with the Session yesterday, a compelling statement, for me at least, is to see the changes in understanding the way of Christ as a matter of **expanding our moral imagination** to embrace the full breadth and depth of the gospel. The moral imagination of the earliest believers was initially constrained by the traditions of Jewish law and teaching. As the movement progressed and grew its moral imagination, it came to see the limitations of Jewish law and teaching in the light of the promise of new life in Christ. What came to be recognized as important, as critical, was not the law of the Torah, but the spirit of love, grace, justice, and peace.

The church continues to be challenged, and frankly should always be challenged, to expand its moral imagination to reach for and embody the highest values of Jesus' way. However, the means letting the traditional, customary, and accepted become relativized, to lose its once irrefutable authority in order to step up and align itself more closely with the way of Christ, so that the church can move forward as the fellowship of the light.

We have our favorite sins, and we recite them like a moral code. Here's one that rarely makes the list. Wealth. When was the last time you heard sin and wealth mentioned in the same breath? Yet we know how harshly all of scripture regards wealth, and Jesus follows in that same vein as his ancestors. He made it clear that the faithful disciple was to esteem and respect and minister to the poor. It was the least of society who were destined for the kingdom of heaven. The wealthy and powerful who ate well, dressed nicely, lived in nice big comfy homes, who owned property, and had surplus funds were invariably on the butt end of every story. Strangely, wealth is not considered sinful in a world of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and suffering. Living in two different worlds, our residence being in the world of relative comfort and security, do we imagine that the Lord is indifferent to the other world of deprivation, struggle, and insecurity? Or have we met one of those unseemly limits in our moral imagination?

Wealth was certainly an issue in the earliest church. Our second reading from Acts 4 is one of a few instances where we hear about the earliest church in Jerusalem having a community of shared goods, or shared wealth and property. Their moral imagination seemed to have embraced this call of Christ to minister sacrificially to the poor, weak, and vulnerable. We even have the rather amusing story of Ananias and Sapphira, the couple who lied about a piece of property, and died on the spot for their greed in withholding their wealth from the community.

Interestingly, we have no record of this kind of attention to personal wealth being shared in community anywhere else; only in Jerusalem, only in Acts. Scholars like to call this communal sharing a "failed experiment" since there is no evidence of it being replicated, at least within the New Testament and early Christian literature. To call it a

“failed experiment” suggests that history has cast its judgment on the effort and found it in error. I think that’s quite hasty and uncalled for.

We hear in Paul’s letters, particularly in Corinthians, about his collection for “the poor in Jerusalem.” Again, many scholars assume that it is a collection like we might have for the poor and needy in our community. But then, it begs the question about the poor in Corinth, or Ephesus, or Thessalonica, doesn’t it? Don’t all of those cities surely have the poor among them? Why not collect for their own neighbors? Why send money to a church in a city they’ve never been to, to people they’ve never met, to meet a need that they have in their own community? Some scholars admit that “the poor in Jerusalem” referred to by Paul in fact refers to this community of shared goods, to the faithful who stepped up their faith commitment to eliminate their wealth so that they could minister to each other, and give witness to their new life in Christ, forming their seemingly unique version of the fellowship of the light.

Finally, there is that peculiar line in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 which begins: *Blessed are the poor **in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* In Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, there is a very clear contrast between the poor who receive “blessings” and the wealthy who receive “woes.” Not so with Matthew. Could it be that Matthew’s ‘the poor in spirit’ reflects an awareness of the special spiritual commitment of the community of shared goods in Jerusalem? *For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

The fellowship of the light is always being challenged, and that’s the way it should be. What the fellowship cannot do, and still remain faithful, is to be unchanging. We like to believe that we have it all together, we have it the way it should be, and we need to do nothing more than hold on tight to what we have. How wrong we would be. To be so deformed, we would shut out the Spirit, climb into our cave, and let the darkness call the shots. May we step out into the light, sharing in the power of the risen Lord to transform what has always been into the promise of new life in him.