

The New Community: New and Sacred Relations

Acts 3: 11-19

1 John 3: 1-7 (8-10)

We continue to look at the new community of believers following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus trying to discern the outlines of how they understood the new situation that they had inherited. Remember from last week that there are no creeds or theologies or orthodox viewpoints guiding them.

These believers in the Messiah Jesus of Nazareth had rather abruptly seen the loss of their leader in a Roman state-sponsored execution, a very intentionally gruesome affair. Yet this one who had been crucified had also risen from the dead and made appearances to the disciples who had followed him. What to do now exactly remained for them to figure out.

This week, we again come upon some of the values that were taken up from Jesus and brought to continued emphasis under the disciples-now-apostles.

The nature of relations between people was something that we see Jesus in the gospel accounts take up with a boundary-defying orientation. Again, bear in mind that Jesus was a Jewish reformer, not the one who sought to create a new religion *per se* in theology or in practice. Rather, Jesus looked at the sacred texts of Judaism and saw God's presence in the world quite differently from Jewish religious leaders.

The concern of Jewish leaders was the righteousness of the faithful before God, a righteousness that was gained by scrupulous attention to the requirements of the Torah-Law. How such righteousness would be obtained and maintained depended on how one understood and practiced the requirements of the Torah-Law. As we know, considerable effort was made to interpret the requirements strictly, for this was the misstep of previous generations who forsook strict requirements and compromised themselves into exile, into sinfulness, and into judgement from God.

Jesus saw the sharp boundaries that had been drawn to keep the pure, righteous and undefiled separate from the impure, profane, and unrighteous. Jesus seems to have had issues from a God's eye view. He might have asked: How does God see these people who may be excluded by religious righteousness boundaries, people who are poor, sick, weak, vulnerable, excluded and condemned for simply being who they are? Had God created some to be condemned and created others to be blessed? That would seem to be what had happened according to the religious leaders. Was that right? Do the scriptures provide insight into God's orientation to God's created people?

Jesus may have been acquainted with the creation stories that begin Genesis. There God creates and calls all things "good" in the first creation story. Then in the second creation story, God forms the first human from the dust and breathes life into the human. But God realizes that this original human creation is all alone. Then God says: "It is **not** good for the human to be all alone." God creates a partner for the human and they form a relationship together. From this, Jesus could recognize that God created

people to be together, to live together, as God's created children, and therefore a family of God's creation.

From this God's eye view, Jesus could perceive that every person must be regarded as a child of God, as a creation of God's love as a Creator, as Father, Mother, Parent of the human creation. If that's the case, then the interpretations of the Torah-Law that create separation, exclusion, and boundaries between people are actually contrary to God's desires. Rather than exclusion to protect righteousness, exclusion is sinfulness, and righteousness comes from inclusions, breaking across boundaries in welcome and hospitality. This offers a wholly new vision for human relations among God's people. Instead of identifying those who are worthy and righteous, God's desire would be to identify all as worthy and to lead them to righteousness.

That's what we should hear in Peter's speech in Acts 3. To set the story that precedes the speech, Peter and (silent) John are going into the Temple for morning prayers. On their way in, they encounter a lame man being carried to his usual station where he would beg for handouts. The man asks Peter and John for a handout. Peter does something unusual; "Peter looked straight at him." What do you do when someone solicits you for money and you have no intention of giving them any? You look away. Peter does the opposite; he looks directly at him.

Peter says: *I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus [the Messiah] of Nazareth, stand up and walk.* Peter and John lift him to his feet and the man walks with them into the Temple. People recognize the crippled beggar and are "filled with wonder and amazement."

Our passage opens saying: *While the beggar **held on** to Peter and John ...* which suggests that the earlier talk of the man walking and jumping may be a bit overblown. Nonetheless, Peter and John have revealed something. The Temple, the house of God, had become a place to beg for money, not a place where the power of God was made manifest, where lives were transformed, where hope and new life flowed from faithfulness. It was a dead end, a destiny of despair and death for that crippled beggar and for everyone else. Peter showed the power of new life in Jesus, and now must explain it as a witness.

He starts by denying that he and John were healers or magicians; this is about Jesus. You remember Jesus, the one that you demanded be executed by Pilate. You screwed up, but God's will overcame such sinfulness to raise Jesus from the dead. It is through faith in Jesus, in his name, that things have changed for this crippled beggar. You didn't know what you were doing then. The time has now come to repent, to change your heart and spirit, and heed the way of Jesus the Messiah.

Peter shares the empowerment to new life that comes from Jesus, restoring God's children to their promise. Crippled and begging in front of God's Temple is not how God's children are to be left. In Jesus, there is healing and restoration as God truly desires, not separation and exclusion, met with indifference acceptance to a struggling sister or brother. Such indifferent acceptance is the sin, not disability or poverty.

Righteousness is established as coming from healing and restoration to wholeness. These are the terms of the new relations among those in the family of God.

Turning now to 1 John, we resume what we began last week. It's a relatively short piece of writing. We saw how it had been focused on the nature of righteousness and sinfulness in Jesus. It continues this central theme that warns against attitudes that would ignore the better sense of the teachings of Jesus and instead embrace ways of the world that are corrupt and contrary to God's will for God's people.

1 John continues to make use of the imagery of light over darkness, trying to show the boundaries of what is sacred from what is profane as the faithful seek to shape their lives to conform to the good news of new life in Jesus.

In chapter 3, having referred to the audience of his writing as "children" several times already, the writer now explains his language directly. *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!* Isn't that lovely? But then he writes: *The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.* This seems peculiar at first glance. The writer knows that being a child of God makes you different from the 'children of the world,' those who have a self-understanding and a common identity derived from their place in the world. Those who follow Jesus as Lord and Messiah derive their identity through Jesus as their brother, as they understand themselves as children of God, too, partners in the promise of God given in Jesus. They are made different from the rest of those in the world, and are not recognized by the rest, hence "the world does not know us."

1 John returns to the issue from last week concerning sin. To review, we learned last week that it seemed as though some were believing that when they had been purified and cleansed from sin by dedicating themselves to Jesus that they could not sin any longer no matter what they did. We saw in this attitude that 'one can now do *anything* and it is no longer sin' as "libertinism," a corruption that Paul also likely encountered in Corinth where some wild things were happening. 1 John goes to tiresomely repetitive lengths (or so it may seem to us) to make the point that sinful behavior remains sinful, and that "no one who lives in [Jesus] keeps on sinning" (3:6, again 3:9).

1 John continues to contrast the righteous who do right with the sinful who do not. But we can certainly ask: What is right? In vs. 10, we get our answer.

This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.

The child of God understands and practices what is right in the eyes of God, in the way of Jesus, in the pattern of the Kingdom. Again, what is right? It is loving another as brother or sister. If you fail to love the other as brother or sister, you cannot imagine that you are a child of God. This is quite unconditional, and we will read further next

week and see that the writer really is being quite unconditional, echoing Jesus' own teaching that we find in the gospels.

We like to believe that we love sister and brother, but we are prone to being conditional, just as the audience hearing 1st John could be. Our love is conditioned on a variety of factors, commonly on something like whether they are religious like us. Is someone who is not a follower of Jesus a sister or brother? Some would deny that, claiming that only those who profess Jesus as Lord and Savior are their true sister or brother. In other ways, we insist that sister or brother be like us. We find it easy to challenge and condemn those who live their lives differently, who face different circumstances, who come from different cultures, who have a different economic standing to cite just a few differences. Conditioning whether one is sister or brother is really rejecting the whole notion that Jesus put forth, which the early church tried to embrace.

Like in any family, we may not like the things that they do, and we may have to take measures that they may not like. But as followers of Jesus' way, we don't get to deny the bonds we share in our brother Jesus and in our Father God, our Creator God.

If we are okay with the crippled beggar petitioning passersby for handouts, maybe even throwing the poor creature a dollar or two in charity, then we have not recognized and embraced the child of God or been moved by a brother in need. We have conditioned our familial love on their acceptability, and by such conditioning, condemned them to go without healing and without hope and without the promise of new life,

Children of God do what Peter and John did; they lift up their brother, help him to stand upright, to walk with support into the presence of God before all who are supposed to be brothers and sisters. They bring to one excluded and outcast, poor and neglected, the good news of Jesus, the promise of life.

That is love as Jesus loved. It is sacred. It is what defines relations for the people of the resurrection faith then, and now.