

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 John 1:5-2.2 *"We Have a Problem"*

"Houston, we have a problem." That has become an ironic reference for almost anything that's going wrong, but in April 1970 to the crew of Apollo 13 it was a real and serious message. An oxygen tank had exploded 55 hours and 200,000 miles after the mission's liftoff, and would soon cause the command module to lose its main supply of electricity, light and water. Thank God, and the skills and ingenuity of the Apollo crew and mission control in Houston, they were able to improvise an escape using the lunar module, and a mission that threatened the life of three astronauts came to a safe ending. Their "problem" had a solution.

1) *The Problem Of Sin*

The first Letter of John has begun with a strong and encouraging proclamation by an eye-witness that Jesus, the "Word of life," had appeared to bring the life of God into the world and to share it with people so that they could have fellowship with God.

John's letter is more like a sermon than a letter, and he follows the principle that one task of preaching (and, it's said, of journalism) is to "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted." John uses uncompromising language and draws stark contrasts; in this, he is very much like Jesus,

who was fond of using hyperbolic language to make his points - "unless you hate your father and mother, you cannot be my disciple," and so on! John and his brother James were called "sons of thunder," and wanted to call down lightning from heaven to strike those who rejected Jesus! You can detect some of that in John's writing!

John will offer plenty of comfort and assurance in his sermon-letter, but also plenty of affliction, especially in the early stages! Here he takes on a serious problem which seems to counter his claim that Jesus has brought life and fellowship with God into the world. The problem is that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" - something John learned from Jesus. "Light" is a metaphor for revelation, for truth; and also for moral purity, justice, righteousness. So Jesus has brought illumination for our ignorance and also light on our sin! That is a problem, because if we are to have fellowship with God and "walk in the light" with him, his light will reveal in us the darkened nature that inherently *separates* us from a God in whom there is "no darkness at all." How can we "walk with God" who is all light, when we too often "walk in darkness" ourselves? How can John's readers; how can we; overcome this problem? John's answer, of course, is that Jesus himself deals with

people's sin, and he makes it possible for them to "walk in the light" with God.

But first John zeroes in on a particularly troubling aspect of the problem: that there were or had been people in the church he is writing too – as there have always been – people who deny that they have a problem! Three times he quotes attitudes or perhaps even teachings that show the depth of some people's denial. There are those who claim to be in fellowship with God but are clearly "walking in darkness." There are people who claim to be without sin. There are people who claim they have not sinned. These, you realize, are not unconverted pagans, but people who are part of the church of Jesus Christ. He is talking about sin and darkness among Christians. How are we to think of that?

2) *Sinners All*

Denial of sin is a perennial problem. The versions of it that we live with are in some ways new, in some ways not. Sometimes denial comes from ignorance – or at least professed ignorance. I heard a minister say recently that when he meets with couples who want to get married, he dreads asking the simple question: what is your address? Odds are they are living together, and when he suggests that this is not right, that sex before marriage goes against Christian moral teaching, he is greeted with blank looks. "Really?" Nobody believes that any more! Now is this ignorance, or denial? You always suspect denial, but then again there is a generation of young people out there who have never heard Christian moral teaching on sexuality, even in church!

Ignorance is one thing, but social mores have also moved so far in certain areas of behavior that many "sins" are no longer counted as sins. Our increasing reliance on medical and psychological and social explanations for

behavior means that many things we used to call sins are now classed as illnesses, addictions, compulsions. If you want to ponder the future of Christian ethics in our children's and grandchildren's generations, you might like to think about what threats to personal responsibility and moral culpability will be thrown up in the next 30 years by neurobiology. What will happen to sin when we have a neurochemical, biological, genetic, explanation for most moods, inclinations, and behaviors? Will "sin" be abolished?

Do we still sin now? Most people in our society have dispensed with the word and the concept – and that includes many Christians. We are encouraged to believe that greed, envy, lust, pride, overweening ambition, lying, gossip, malice, impatience, are not only normal but admirable. They make our world go round! They drive our consumer economy! No wonder our children are confused! No wonder they cannot figure out any "values" beyond "personal choice" and "being true to yourself." No wonder the only virtue that is now accepted by everyone is "tolerance" and the only vice is "intolerance"!

By now, you may be saying "OK, you don't need to belabor the point!" But you and I live in a world where it is now commonplace and accepted – even among Christians – to "work off the books," to "under-report income" to the IRS, to "stumble upon" internet pornography, to have inappropriate relationships with people you work with. What does a New Yorker think a yellow traffic signal means? Speed up!! We live in a world where sin has so lost its meaning, that at some level we live in constant denial that we are "sinners."

But of course at another level we are only too aware of it. At another level we know we feel guilty, even if we are not always sure about what! At a deep level, we feel uneasy if not

rebellious at the thought of coming “into the light of God.” We are in a bit of a mess. We do have a problem.

3) *Agreeing With God*

The consequences of denial of sin, as John pointedly says, are that we deceive ourselves, and we make God out to be a liar. Our claim to know and to have fellowship with God may be untrue. We may in fact be “walking in the darkness.”

What to do about that? John tells us of one simple act, and two big reasons, that can break this impasse. The first is to *agree with God*. That is the simple meaning of the old word “confess” - to acknowledge, to say the same as, to admit - that God is right in saying that we are “creatures of darkness.” To “confess our sins” is to lay before God our actions, our thoughts, our inclinations, and to ask him to review them, to evaluate them, to forgive them where they run against his will, and to remove the guilt of them from our shoulders, and to deliver us from the power they have over us.

If we will confess, then we will find - says John - that God our Father in heaven is “ready to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” He is ready and eager to do this because Jesus his Son stands at his right hand as our advocate, our defender, to say “this is a child of mine, a brother or sister of mine; this is one for whom I died.” This is where “the blood of Jesus” covers over all our sin; this is where his willing sacrificial death for us becomes the basis of our forgiveness and cleansing. Jesus stands beside us and pleads our case on the basis of what he has already done for us.

His death and rising again are what make it possible for us to “walk in the light.” Because he died for us, we can live with God. Because

he took our sin upon himself, we can be acquitted and we can be delivered. Because of Jesus’ death, we can have open fellowship with God even though we are still aware of sin in our lives; even though we know we are not all we should be; even though we know that we have sinned today and will sin tomorrow; even though the passing years bring us not only little victories over sin, but also a deeper awareness of the depths of sin within us. Despite all that we know about ourselves, we find the reassurance that God loves us because we are joined by faith to his Son.

One simple act of confession, and two facts - that Jesus is our *atonement* for sin and our *advocate* with the Father - make it possible for us to “walk in the light” with our heads held up, our faces uncovered to reflect the light of God’s presence. We do not have to skulk in the shadows or hide in the darkness; we can walk in the light and have fellowship with God and with one another because of Jesus! We can share in the life he came to bring because he shared in our death.

There is, in other words, great freedom in Christ - not the freedom to sin, but the freedom to live as though we did not. We can live with confidence before God, we can live with faith and hope, because we know Jesus covers over all our sins - past, present and future - and that he has even dealt with the deeper issue of “sin” itself - that hidden, inner inclination to go against God and only for ourselves in all things.

“Walking in the light” is living a life of *honesty* before God, and - to a growing degree - of a life of *purity* before him. It is being freed from the need to deny that there is anything wrong with us, to claim to be better than we are, to blame everything that goes wrong on other people, to be quick in criticizing others and slow in forgiving them. To walk in the light is to be aware of the

darkness around us and within us, and to seek by God's grace to avoid it; but when we do fall into it, to be quick to confess and to ask forgiveness for it.

Our "sin problem" can destroy our lives, our mission, our calling, our marriages, our families, our faith. Denying that it is a problem sets us up for just that sort of disaster. But confessing and relying on Jesus as Atonement and Advocate frees us from the guilt and power of sin.

To be a Christian is to rely on Jesus. To be a Christian is to give up on self-reliance, self-justification, self-importance, self-righteousness, self-pity - self-anything! - and rely on Jesus. To be a Christian is not to deny that we are sinners, but to confess that we are indeed - and that "sinners saved by grace" is all we will ever be on this side of glory!

Let us pray...