

When I graduated from college, my vocation prior to serving as a minister and chaplain, was working as high school history teacher. Next to the fascinating encounters of teaching and learning with my students, one of the things that I enjoyed was moving about the classroom as I provided instruction. I found it kept people on their toes. One of the things that tickled me was intercepting those little notes that were being passed from student to student. They were kind of fun to read. Seeing how intricately they folded them to try and disguise them. You could glean some really juicy social information from those. Who was dating who? The chalk I smeared on my pants, and the classic if the recipient liked the sender check yes or no. It was like reading someone else's mail. I didn't write it, I was not the sender nor the intended recipient, but I had a front row seat to the "mail's content."

That is how I feel about the books of 1, 2, and 3rd John. A little voyeuristic, perhaps, I feel like I am reading someone else's mail. As human's we love that though. Across time and place reading each other's mail and correspondence reveals a lot about culture, wisdom, what is happening in a given time and place, and is quite informative. Reading these brief letters in 1,2, 3rd John we step into a community divided with the those who remain trying to return to some sort of cohesion and community as they were originally called by God, while fending off those who left. To do that, restore cohesion and rebuild community the remnant must look within themselves, begin with the ones in the mirror and confess what they know to be true. That is where the scripture passage that I chose for today goes, and it even relates to us.

In worship we have been examining some of the smaller perhaps lesser known books of the bible. When asked to participate in leading a portion of this

sermon series I turned to the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Letters of John. They are extensions in some way of the fourth gospel that reminds us of the commandment “to Love One another, as I have loved you,” but there is more to these three small books than their on going theme of love. That is where we will go today, we will still touch on the love theme, but I want to talk the need to confess our sins to seek redemption and restoration by looking at that early Christian community to which these letters were sent.

That early Christian Community was divided by politics, theology, behaviors, thoughts, and actions. Sounds pretty familiar if you turn on the news or step outside, I think we might learn something from them. Listen to the word of God -

1 John 1: 5-10 - 5 This is the message we have heard from God and declare to you: God is light; in God there is no darkness at all. 6 If we claim to have fellowship with God and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. 7 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, purifies us from all sin.

8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make God out to be a liar and God’s word is not in us.

First , before we go any further with confession and 1 John, let’s take a look at these 3 letters overall. We are talking about 3 brief writings that come headed toward the rear of the New Testament. Examining these writings have brought scholars a lot of questions and few answers. Were all three letters of 1, 2, 3 John all sent at once? Were they all addressed to the same city? Did the same person

write them all? In what order were they written? Differently than they are ordered in the canon? Who was the elder? Who were the recipients?

This is what we think, the three letters were probably all sent at the same time to the same place, It is believed that 2nd and 3rd John are preserved by 1st John.

1. 3 John – a certifying letter to Gaius, from the elder, that the carrier of the other 2 letters, Demetrius, was to be received with open arms
2. 2 John to be read to the entire assembly – and to serve as an introduction or cover letter to 1 John.
3. 1 John is not really a letter but more like an exhortation or homily (mini-sermon)

All three are to be seen as parts of an epistolary package. (back and forth letter writing – genre of lit where author uses letter writing to tell their story.

What we know by reading someone else's mail is that these Letters speak of conflict and division. Each one speaks of conflict in it's own way

- 3- political conflict, between rival leaders
- 2– disagreements over proper teaching
1. Doctrinal and moral disagreements dominate

Overall the conflict and division appears to be generated from within, internal disputes and rivalries, rather than from an outside source.

In the fourth gospel, John, the Church is beautifully and richly called to be (now listen to this) “a community of friends, sharing one spirit, joined to Jesus as Jesus is to God in fellowship of unity and love.” If that can't be lived out there is crisis, and that is what we find in these letters, a community, a church divided. Their Christology (or who they believe Jesus is) has them divided and needs to be

worked out. There is a group that has remained and a group that has left or gone out. The group that has remained is being called to focus on rebuilding themselves, as they cannot control or do much about those who have left.

2nd and third John mention the mutual withholding of hospitality as something that was happening. In early Christian culture to deny hospitality was to deny Christ. The NT is full of stories directing us in ways of hospitality. Those who have remained are caught between what they believe and how to practically apply it. So they are caught between assertion (what they believe) and exhortation (or translating it to appropriate behavior).

So what does this group that has remained need to do to generate some cohesion and restore their community? Pay attention because we could learn something here as the church, but also a community that waxes and wains between unity and division over theological and secular issues.

- a. Return to faithfulness about what they believe and know to be true about God
- b. Obedience to an earlier commandment in the fourth gospel and the other letters of John “Love one another.”
- c. Return to group cohesion starting with the remnant examining its own sinfulness and remembering that their redemption came and will continue to come through Jesus as their advocate with God.

Existing in this divided community, it is no longer sufficient enough to believe that just because you were born of God that you are incapable of sin. We are sinful people, from day one (thanks Adam and Eve) and fall short of the Glory of God. Next, if something is broken, go back to the beginning. Go back to how

God called them, and us to be. God calls us to be those walking in the light which means a calling to total obedience to God. The division found in the 1st letter of John, brings up something new. That the denial of our sinful nature is not loving ourselves or others and is a form of self-deception.

This is where we really enter into the reading for today – **8If we say that we have no sin the truth is not in us.9 If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar, and God’s word is not in us.**

We move a little closer to applying what we believe, we move closer to exhortation when we examine our sinfulness. That’s why I chose these letters of John today. There is a direct correlation to our worship together.

These words of verses 8-9 are often used in Presbyterian worship as a Call to confession. If we say that we have no sin then we make our own perfection more important than God’s mercy.

In order to reset the divided back to a community of one spirit and in right relationship with God there needs to be faithfulness to the God who saved us from sin, and today saves us from ourselves. God gave the divided people of these letters, and us today the gift of life from the side of the crucified – a gift of mercy and grace that is needs revisiting regularly.

The division and conflict that we enter into the middle of in these letters is surmountable, by returning to the commandment to Love one another, and to humbly love one another enough to confess our sins (in thought, word, and deed) against God and one another. To generate cohesion these early Christians, and we today because we are reading someone else’s mail, are called not just once but over and over again to confess their sins.

So how do those of us living in 2020 move from assertion to exhortation ? I think that is for us to figure out. The answers will start to come when we are humble enough to admit that we are sinners and I think where we fall short of the glory of God seems a good place to start. Amen...

Blessing or benediction –

As people who have been called to walk in the light know that today and everyday it is God who gave you life and calls you to obedience and faithfulness. When our light grows dim, we must examine our sinfulness and seek God's loving grace and mercy. So go out into the world and where there is divisiveness sow love, and let your sewing kit begin with you and allow your instrument to be humility.

Know that you have been redeemed, and may the grace, mercy, and peace of God continue to surround and be revealed to you in the days and weeks ahead.

Covenant friends, I have known about this church since 2005 in Guatemala and when I joined a group of Wisconsin travelers while serving as a YAV there. That experience and the connectional nature of the Presbyterian Church is what brought me to this community of faith in the spring of 2018. Therefore, I wanted to share with you some bittersweet, yet exciting news.

After 2 years of living, working, and playing in Wisconsin I have been offered and accepted a call to serve as a staff chaplain at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital in Nashville, TN.

I wanted to thank the staff at Covenant and you all for letting me walk among you, pray with and for you, join you at your tables, for a meal, laugh, learn and cry together in small groups, but most of all call you my friends. I want to thank

you for welcoming this Minister, hospital chaplain, and child of God into your midst, and caring about me, while I cared about you.

I will hold fond memories of Covenant in my heart. My love and thanks to you all, as I and my felt friends head off to the Music City.