

“Sin Boldly”

1 John 1:5-9

They say that history is written by the victors, which is why it can be so distorted oftentimes. 1 John is written by a victor, the truth be told, even if it’s a Pyrrhic victory, in other words, a victory “won at too great a cost to have been worthwhile for the victor.” 1 John is a letter written to those still left in a church after there had been a huge fight, with the survivors licking their wounds, still angry about the trouble made by those who left, while trying to convince themselves that they had done the right thing in the principled stand they had made. Indeed, they were making lemonade out of the sour lemons that had been their lot.

Actually, this may seem odd given that 1 John has some of the best lines in the Bible when it comes to love. “How can we say that we love God whom we cannot see while we hate our brother and sister, whom we can?” the letter asks. “Beloved let us love one another, for everyone who loves knows God and is born of God. The one who loveth not, knoweth not love for God is love.” These are wonderful, encouraging lines, no doubt, but if you put them up against lines in the epistle that call those who do not love as liars and children of the devil, then you might begin to see that the brothers and sisters we are encouraged to love are only those who remain in the church with you. We would likely see the writer bristle with disgust if someone would quote Jesus to him that we are to turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, love, not hate, our enemies. For the author of 1 John, the enemies are the devil’s seed.

In some ways, I’m sorry to burst anyone’s bubble about what’s behind these cherished words. Yet, at the same time, wisdom does ask us to tell the whole truth about such things in order to a deeper, more authentic understanding of how we can live out of the grace of God. The conflict in the church that is addressed in 1 John is like what most all of us often experience of being “damned if you do, while also being damned if you don’t.” Finding apt one of Paul Simon’s less than well known songs:

When something goes wrong
I'm the first to admit it
I'm the first to admit it
But the last one to know
When something goes right
Well it's likely to lose me
It's apt to confuse me
It's such an unusual sight
I can't get used to something so right
Something so right

I’m guessing that many of us know such dilemmas.

Theologians over the centuries have pondered such dilemmas. They have posited that even our best, most self-effacing actions, have their sinful aspects. If I help someone who is down and out, despite my protestations, if I’m honest, I would have to confess the hint of a self-congratulatory reward for having been a good helper. The

martyr gets the promise of heaven for her sacrifice. The do-gooder finds himself facing the trap of becoming great for having chosen to be a servant.

I'm not sure that this was quite what the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther had in mind, 500 years ago, when he penned the phrase "sin boldly," but many people have since applied his words to that frequent dilemma of what to do when there seem to be no purely good options. When the room where it happens is where you hate the sin and love the sinner, what is often left to us is the choice of being stymied by sin into inaction versus the opportunity to sin boldly so that we might also do something good. Recently, we've been hearing heroic Congressman John Lewis who is being laid to rest this week, quoted as saying that he got into lots good trouble. I like that. I'm a devotee! What I think the phrase "sin boldly" says to us is that we really have no other option but to make mistakes, to do wrong, even when we try to live bearing the image of God, when we are most devoted to Christ. Given that, do your best. Act according to your most courageous conscience before God and know that God's grace doesn't just forgive us, it lets us act with promise to make a positive difference in lives. God's forgiveness means to encourage our agency, our courage to act, rather than to make us withdraw and protect ourselves because we are afraid of being punished.

Over the last few weeks, we've grappled with sin. I've tried to say how helpful the concept is – reiterating an insight that came from Barbara Brown Taylor that while sin became an old fashioned concept because it was too often used as a club instead of a truth that leads both to authenticity and redemption. Absent the usefulness of sin, we have reverted to wrongs either being thought of as criminality or sickness. But these leave us either condemning and throwing out the wrongdoer, with no redemption or leave us less agency, the sickness being no fault but also no responsibility. Last week I tried to then talk about that while God does indeed forgive our sins, that this is not a last step but a first step towards a more relational understanding of sin – that it asks us to take actions to reconcile with others as God's fuller purpose. We are not condemned, but nevertheless are invited to find and build community.

Despite the animosity just under the beautiful words of 1 John, there is also some very great value in its teaching. It's too bad that John kept limits on who is considered the brother or sister who we see and we are to love when we say that we love God, whom we cannot see. Jesus had not meant just the church friends that you like when he said that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. The full extent of who he was bending the ark of history towards even included the enemy. But what 1 John shares, if that is the one we understand as our brother or sister, is right. How can we say that we love God whom we cannot see and then hate others who we do see?

Similarly, 1 John has something very valuable to say to us in the first chapter from which we read this morning. On the rare occasion that I am leading the Prayer of Confession in church, I often say these words as a way of introducing that prayer. I do so with a purpose in mind. "If we say that we have no sin, the truth is not in us and we deceive ourselves," I intone. "But if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us of all our unrighteousness." I say these words before we make our confession as a way of priming the pump if you will. Before I start my lawnmower, I always push the gas prime button ten times. That puts enough fuel in the line to get things going so that the engine will then draw other necessary fuel into its workings. In the same way, if we are told before we say our prayer of confession that God is going to forgive us, it is a

way of conveying confidence in the prayer. God is faithful and just, indeed, AND WILL FORGIVE US OF ALL OUR UNRIGHTEOUSNESS!

I think the same is true for why we are to sin boldly. Yes, we are caught in sin. We aren't going to get away from it, despite our best efforts. Either we end up with some Sophie's Choice of the lesser of two evils, or even with our best actions there is some selfish, self-centered motivation that taints the good we would do. So, go forward. God who is faithful and just will cleanse us of all our unrighteousness. Go and serve the Lord, with gladness. Do not hold back. Do not tame your courage to be about good trouble. Act. Sin. Boldly. Amen.