

4-11-21

Easter 2

1 John 1:1—2:2

Communion

Get Real!

We've all known people like some of the people who were apparently a part of the congregation to which this first letter of John was written. We think these letters were written about ten years after the events we just celebrated last week—the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

That means there had been enough time for the Church to begin to be the Church. And all of us who spend our lives here know that there are two ways to think about the Church. There is the Church that Jesus envisioned when he gave his life for the salvation of the world, the Church wholly committed to his message of hope and promise. Sometimes we call this the invisible Church. That's not because we don't see signs of it among us, but because we know that it is something bigger and broader than what we experience every day. It is that invisible Church, the one wholly committed to Jesus and his Way, that we strive to create and maintain in the world after all these years. We see signs of it on big days like Easter, even in a year like this one when we're not hitting on all cylinders. The day is beautiful. Attendance is good. The preaching is tolerable. Everyone is feeling good, and we can catch a glimpse of what this is all supposed to be about.

Most of the time, though, we spend our lives in that other Church, the one we might call the Visible Church, the one like this one that we come to week in and week out, Easter Sunday and the Sunday after, and all the Sundays lining up before us. As hard as we try, we don't always get to see the Church died and rose for. Sometimes we get to see the Church we know, warts and all. People we know, sometimes too well. People who have all different kinds of reasons for being here. Some come with

pure hearts and a sincere desire to encounter God. And some come for all kinds of other reasons. Some come to be seen. Some come to be heard. Some aren't sure why they're here, but they know things had better be right when they come or somebody will hear about it. We had a man in another congregation who carried a red pen in his suit pocket every week and loved it when he found a typo in the bulletin. He'd mark that bulletin up with that red pen and leave it on the secretary's desk with some rude comment and feel good about it. Now, be assured, no one cringes more than I do when a typo makes it through however many times the bulletin gets proofread than I do. We have a few from time to time. But the shelf life of that document is about an hour. And most of the time, we can use it for the guide it was intended to be and move on. We've had a few zingers, and, in these days when we are without a secretary, we'll probably have a few more. But, hopefully, they will not prevent us from worshiping and finding God's grace together. It's that visible Church, with typos in the bulletin and people intent on finding them, that turns out to be a different place than the Church God wants us to know.

Fred Craddock was one of my favorite preachers. He grew up in a small town in West Tennessee and didn't have the opportunity to go to church. He knew there was such a thing, but his family didn't have a car and had no way to get there. But he heard about it, mostly from a Black man who lived up the road from Fred and his family. That man went to church every Sunday, and he would tell little Fred all about it. He said that when the people started singing and the preacher started preaching and the people started listening, it was a wonderful thing. He told Fred you could see angels hovering overhead. It was wonderful!

One day someone everyone knew in that community died and Fred got to go to the funeral with that man up the road. He couldn't wait! When he got there, everything was much different than he expected. The building itself didn't look like much of a place angels would hover around. It was an old weatherboard building, built on a foundation of rocks like many you've probably

seen out in the country. The paint was peeling, and when Fred and his friend got inside it wasn't much different. Fred only had his friend's stories to go on, so he kept his thinking to himself. The church was full, as they often are for funerals. It wasn't long before the people started singing. And the preacher started preaching. And the people started listening, and Fred couldn't help but look up toward the ceiling and wait to see what would happen. Nothing did. Poor Fred said that was the most disappointing day of his life. It wasn't anything at all like he thought it was going to be. It was just an old, run-down building and a bunch of old, run-down people trying to get over the death of someone they loved.

At that time in his life, all Fred could see was what the Visible Church around him. But he went on, against all those odds to be a great preacher and teacher of preachers for many years. Every time I heard him preach it was in a huge hall in a convention setting. But I swear I think I saw at least one angel hovering over us every time I heard him.

We like to think that worship and everything else about life in the Early Church was like the Invisible Church, the one Jesus wants us to know, every time it met. If we pay much attention to the Scripture, however, we know better. Sometimes, when things are just not what we'd hoped for in the Church we experience, we convince ourselves that if we could just go back to the way things were in the earliest days of the Christian Church, if we could just reclaim the purity of those days, we'd be onto something. But then we read the New Testament, which confronts us with a record of those churches, and we pretty quickly decide that what we have is better than we thought. The letters of Paul show us just how conflicted churches could be. And this first letter of John gives us a glimpse into another real life place where people were trying to be faithful in the real world, the world Jesus died to save.

You have heard some of the words from today's glimpse into this congregation's life many times. We use them to guide us to confession and to assure us of God's forgiveness. If we claim we have no sin, we deceive no one more than ourselves, and the

truth is not in us. But if we confess our sin, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive us our sin and cleanse us of all unrighteousness. We used those words today. Anyone who comes to Church on the Sunday after Easter knows how true they are. Apparently, the congregation to which this letter was addressed was full of people at various stages of their journeys of faith. Some thought they had arrived at a point at which sin was not a part of their life. Others were not so confident.

We've talked before about a young couple who showed up in another congregation I served some time ago. They were nice kids. Had a baby shortly after they hooked up with us. We celebrated with them when he was born and then we baptized him and celebrated with them again. I didn't know much about their church or spiritual background when they came to us, but it quickly became apparent that they were at a place on their journey at their young ages that many others in our congregation, regardless of their age, were not. They stayed after worship one Sunday and asked if I could suggest some alternate prayer or something else they could do while they rest of us confessed our sin each Sunday. It seems that they thought they didn't need to do that. They didn't sin, they told me. So they felt left out of that part of the service.

I guess they were living totally in the Invisible Church, the pure Church committed to the way of Jesus.

I haven't seen them in a long time, but I used to see bumper stickers on cars driven by members of another denomination that said, "If you're still sinning, you're not saved." And then it told whoever read it where they needed to come to Church. I never saw one of those bumper stickers on that young couple's car in our parking lot. But I figured out pretty quickly that that's how they felt.

Apparently some distant ancestors of that couple were in John's congregation. And they were creating some confusion for others. Sometimes we can set the bar so high that people decide they're never going to meet it. It seems to me to be much more helpful to be real about the way we practice our faith. Jesus didn't

save us and pluck us out of the real world to live where everything and everyone are pure and perfect. We'll know that joy one day when we all live together in God's kingdom. But for now, we find ways to be faithful in a world where all is not well, where everyone is not to be trusted, and where we don't always measure up to the standards we set for ourselves, let alone the ones other impose on us. We live and worship and learn and grow with people of all different opinions and persuasions. Most of us gave up a long time ago on hoping that the mind of Christ, for which we strive, is the only mind among us. Even though some of us cancel out each other's votes every time we go to the ballot and even though our discussions can get pretty lively sometimes, and even though once in a while someone decides that the way we do things just won't work for them—even though all those things and others are a part of life in the Church in the real world, we keep trying to make it work. And we try to make it real.

We have two middle school girls who are involved in the Confirmation process this year. They're meeting on Sunday afternoons for the next few weeks to talk about what it means to profess faith in the Presbyterian Church. I hope that that's what they'll both decide to do when our class is over. Both of them have DeCoux blood coursing through their veins, so they really don't have much choice in the matter. Today's the day that we talk about worship. Why we do what we do the way we do it. They, like most of us, have been to church in other places, and they know that things are different in different places. There are few things that are more real than talking about things that matter with middle school kids. They don't care about historical tradition. They don't care about theological truth. Our conversation this afternoon, and every other afternoon, will be real. They like to talk about what matters. And what doesn't.

One of the things we'll talk about today is what's meaningful in worship for them and what isn't. They won't hold back. I'll let you know how it goes. And I'll also let you know one of the things that I always tell Confirmation classes. When this day comes and we talk about what works in worship and what

doesn't I usually ask them what means most to them about worship. I'll usually tell them what works for me to get the conversation started. Every class I've ever taught always thinks that they're supposed to think the sermon is the most important part of the service. They always think it's the part I like best. Probably because I do it. They are usually surprised when I tell them that that playing in the water part is my favorite part of worship. When I get to be the one who stands there and tells us all that, whoever we are and whatever we've done or not done, God will forgive us and love us and help us try again. That's one of those Fred Craddock angels hovering over us times for me. The sermon is important, too, but it helps to know about forgiveness before that comes.

I often think of another Confirmation class and a kid named Scott. I have no idea where Scott is or what he's up to these days. But when he was in middle school and in Confirmation with our Kyle, we got to this day. It was a big class that year. I was a little hesitant because Scott was, let's say, usually inattentive during worship. I had no idea what he might say about worship. But when it came Scott's turn to say what worked best for him in worship, he didn't hesitate. This kid that we all thought had never paid attention said he knew for sure what was most important. He didn't know what to call it, he said, but he said it was that part at the end when I came down from the pulpit and stood on the floor with everybody else and threw my arms out like I was trying to hug the whole Church at once and said, "It's OK. You can go home now. God loves you. And it's going to be OK!"

Scott got it! That kid knew that some in John's congregation, that young couple in mine, and all of us need to know. God loves us. And it's going to be OK. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Prayers of the People

Good and gracious God, we give you thanks for the joy and the wonder of last week's worship, but we thank you today that Easter

is a season and not just a day. The Good News of Easter is far too much to comprehend for one day. So we give you thanks that we have days like today to continue to ponder your great love that was willing to die so that we can live, that canceled the power of death so that we can live as your people in the real world. We give you thanks that you are among us in Resurrection power to free us from all that would keep us from knowing joy and contentment, power that enables us to know the fullness of life that you desire for all your children. Help us to welcome this power and presence even when it requires us to examine and reexamine our thinking and our priorities. We pray for your Church today as it strives to be faithful in conflicted times. Help us to form a community in which people are attended to, listened to, cared about, and set free to serve. We pray for people everywhere and for those in power over all of us. Help us to work for the good of all and to strive for justice for all and not just for some. We pray for all who are hungry and for opportunities we have to feed them, both physically and spiritually. We pray for all who are neglected or lonely or cast aside. Help us to stand with them and to help them to find your love for them as we have found it for us. We pray for people whose lives are in turmoil because they live with violence and fear as daily realities, not just in distant places, but here among us, too. Help us to be signs of your love as well as your justice. As we begin to move toward schedules and activities that make sense to us again, help us not to forget to be cautious and caring as we move forward. Keep us thankful for those who serve the sick and the dying. Thank you for those who provide vaccinations and for those who receive them. Comfort those who are sick and all who have lost loved ones to this virus or to other causes. Keep us mindful of your mercy and show us how to share it with one another. We pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us all to pray when he said: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen

Bob Phelps

Pastor, J J White Memorial Presbyterian Church
110 Third Street McComb, MS 39648
church phone 601.684.4189