

Sermon April 11, 2021  
Redeemer, Ramsey  
Pastor Michael Linderman

Grace, Mercy and Peace from God our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Yes, Happy Easter to you all. This is the second Sunday in the season of Easter, and we are celebrating Easter all season long! I believe it was the late Karen Whitaker, a member of Redeemer, who told me how she taught this emphasis to her kids and grandkids. She always told them, it's not just a day, it's a season.

And indeed, we have five more Sundays after today to celebrate the season of Easter, because Easter is a week of Sundays. That is, there are seven Sundays in the Season of Easter, including Easter Sunday itself. Seven Sundays of Easter, and then Pentecost Sunday, and the start of the Pentecost Season.

So counting today, we have 6 Sundays of Easter left. And as a special emphasis this season, I am proposing to preach on the Epistle lesson each week for the remainder of the Easter Season. It works particularly well this year, because on these six Sundays, the epistle lesson is from the First letter of John. The epistle lesson is what we call our second lesson, and follows the reading of the psalm for the day. It is called an epistle because it comes from the letters of the New Testament that come after the Gospels and the Book of Acts, and before the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation. Epistles were written by apostles and other leaders to address community concerns in the earliest Christian congregations, and they were intended to be read out loud to the community. Altogether, there are three letters of John, and we will be looking at the first one for the rest of the season.

Why do this? Well, 1<sup>st</sup> John is one of the most popular Epistles in the New Testament. In Luther's lectures on 1<sup>st</sup> John, he called it an "outstanding epistle...so beautifully and gently does it picture Christ to us." Indeed, we get not only a picture of Christ, but we also get to see what it is like to follow in Christ's way. The Epistle uses simple language to talk about many topics that are dear to the hearts and minds of Christians. It speaks clearly about sin and forgiveness, about the

light of God, about Christian obedience and walking in the light, and about God's love, and even God being love itself. Many terms that 1<sup>st</sup> John uses are shared with the Gospel of John, and so we believe that the Gospel of John and the three letters of John come out of the same community of Christians. There were probably several separate congregations that belonged to this theological community, who were all primarily influenced by the teaching of the Beloved Disciple, as he/or she is referred to in the Gospel of John.

It has been long standing tradition to hold that the writer of the Gospel of John and the letters of John is the same person, if not John the apostle, then someone in the community using the authority of his name. Since so many concepts and terms are shared by both the letters and the gospel, that is an easy assumption. However, we believe that the writer of the letters is different from the writer of the Gospel. There are some important stylistic differences in the use of language. And, when we compare the central concern of the Gospel to that of the letters, we see that the two writers are worried about different things. The Gospel of John is troubled by a conflict that the community of Christian believers is having with the local Jewish community. However, when we read the letters, the conflict is now with false teachers within the believing community itself. The conflict has shifted from an inside-outside conflict to a totally inner conflict within the church community itself. So we see that the community has moved on since the writing of the Gospel, and the conflict that spurs the writer of the letters to action has changed.

Now you may already be rolling your eyes that all this information isn't that practical for your own faith journey, but today, and for the next several weeks, I beg you to listen carefully to how fundamental the concerns of this letter are to your understanding of your Christian faith. If we just start with the first four verses of the letter, which are in our portion that we read today, the author states very clearly that what he is passing on to you and me is based on eye-witness testimony. This proclamation comes out of a tangible experience that these early Christians have had. Thomas's experience in the Gospel lesson today illustrates what it was like for those first disciples to encounter the risen Christ.

Furthermore, he is relaying this testimony to you and me so that we may have fellowship together, one with another, and with the Father and the Son Jesus Christ. If you listen to his teaching, and receive it, you will become one in this

fellowship with the writer himself and with God and Jesus. This is what keeps the church together, in Christian fellowship, as we say, that is, the act of testifying, listening, and receiving in faith the testimony about Christ that is given here. Our first lesson today from the Book of Acts shows us what it was like in the early church to have that fellowship. It was so fresh an experience, so real, so mutual, that their fellowship transformed their own lives. They went from living for themselves to living completely for and with one another. It was community in the way of God, “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Since we are called together in fellowship by their testimony about Christ, we gather each week in church to re-hear the testimony that was given, and receive it in faith so that we may have fellowship with each other, and also with these ancient people who had these experiences that we can learn from. Because of this practice, we are part of a huge community of believers across time and space. Through this fellowship, we can be bolstered in our faith and energized to go out into the world as servants of the Gospel and invite others into the fellowship we share.

Think of your own experience with faith. Think of the many sources of testimony that you have witnessed and believed in your life. For me, the primary sources of faith were my parents, my grandmother on my father’s side, the three congregations I grew up in until I was an adult, and the people I met in my experiences in the wider church, such as at camp or college or seminary. You have heard the testimony from many other people, you have read the testimony in scripture and other books, and you have experienced the testimony of faith, in your own heart and mind. To help shape and mold all of these different experiences, we rely on theological traditions. The theology of the Gospel of John and the three letters of John represent one early form of a Christian theological tradition. It is distinct from the other early prominent traditions represented in the new testament epistles of Paul, or Peter, or James.

Let me add here, that in our day, this is what our Lutheran tradition provides for us. It isn’t meant to be restrictive, but rather it gives shape to our experience, order to the variety of thoughts and teachings we come across, and helps us weed out other theological thoughts and teachings that lead to confusion or unhelpful theological thinking. The writer of First John today calls this kind of error “walking

in darkness". He writes in verses 6 and 7, "If we say that we have fellowship with God while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; <sup>7</sup>but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." Lutheranism, just as much as any of the other major theological traditions, wants to help the church walk in the light. And we are always open to being corrected, if by gentle debate and dialogue, we may be convinced by others that our teaching needs an update or change. In fact, it is a tenant of Lutheran theology that the church is in constant need of reform. That is why we continue to read new books by new generations of theologians, who are writing in order to wrestle with the new circumstances and contexts in which we find ourselves as time and history march on.

If you find this lesson on the purpose of theological traditions less important, rest assured, the goal of all this, as First John articulates, is fellowship with God and Jesus Christ. Christ came to forgive sins and bring immortality to light, and trusting in his death and resurrection, we receive forgiveness and live in the light of God's loving presence. We have fellowship with God and Christ, and dear friends, please know how precious this fellowship really is. In our world, there are many forms of community, many groups to follow or belong to. But Christians believe that the church gives us direct access to Christ's grace, Christ's mercy and forgiveness, and Christ's eternal life. These gifts bring us true abundance in life now, and eternal life hereafter. May the light of Christ suffuse your hearts and minds, so that your life might be a witness to his goodness and love. Amen.