

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“Real: Blinders”
1 John 2:7-11

This is the second week in our sermon series to start the New Year, a series we’re calling “Real.” And if you missed us last Sunday, this series is focusing on what true fellowship is and what keeps us from it. History behind this is that last Fall, our church’s leaders, our elders, deacons, and staff, were asked what they consider to be some of the spiritual challenges facing us as a church, and among the number of answers the #1 responses had to do with why we put up barriers between ourselves. And we talked last week about what that might mean, what that might mean about us as a church. And because fellowship is part of the core identity of a church gathered in the name of Jesus, an issue with fellowship is an issue with our very witness to the world.

Last week, in looking at the beginning of John’s first letter, John talks about what does hold us back from true fellowship, with each other and with God, and simply speaking, it’s sin. Means we’re walking in darkness. No sense of direction; we’re lost. And this week, you might recognize a lot of similar language from last week, language of darkness and light, and again John talks about what holds us back from true fellowship, what keeps us in the darkness, but this time around, John talks more pointedly. He singles something out: hatred. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

There’s an old story I heard from a former congregant, and the sound of it makes it seem like it’s one of those stock church stories, but he told it to me on more than one occasion, so I’m sharing it now. There was a new pastor at a new church, and his first Sunday there, he goes up into the pulpit and preaches his sermon. Everyone loves it. Next Sunday comes around. He gets up into the pulpit. Preaches the exact same sermon again. Folks are a bit puzzled, but they roll with it. The next Sunday comes around. Preaches the exact same sermon. Folks are getting a bit annoyed, but still they go along. Then a fourth Sunday rolls around. Preaches the exact same sermon. Now folks are mad.

So after that fourth week, one of them goes up to the preacher. (This is how I know it’s not a true story, because in no church ever would it take four weeks for someone to speak up.) But they ask him, hey, why are you giving the same sermon over and over? And the pastor said, “Yeah, well, when y’all get that one I’ll preach a new one.” My guess is he didn’t last long there, but that’s how the story goes.

John in his letter shares that he is writing, as he puts it in v. 7, “no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard.” The point is that what he’s about to say isn’t anything new. It’s something they’ve heard before, but like a sermon heard a second time, maybe something they haven’t quite understood or put into practice.

But then he says v. 8, “yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.” He just said

he wasn't writing a new commandment, but then he says he is writing a new commandment, and it all seems kind of confusing, but it sounds like good news regardless. The darkness is passing, the light is shining.

John has just gotten done talking about Christ's atoning sacrifice for our sin, and those that know him, those that abide in him ought to walk just as he walked, to live as he lived. So as John's talking about the light, he's talking about the life Christ has ushered in, a new life, because he has born the sin of the world. And it is in the life Christ ushers in that John tells us that he does indeed write a new commandment because the light is already shining, because Christ has done what he did. And that commandment is: don't hate your brother or sister; love your brother or sister.

Not exactly groundbreaking, I wouldn't think. Turns out it's been heard many times before. Just one such instance is from the other passage we read this morning in Leviticus: love your neighbor as yourself. But there's something about Jesus that makes it new, something that opens people's eyes to see it in a new way, a new way so wonderful that you never could have imagined it before.

It'd be like having a rulebook to baseball, but you've only ever seen Little League, and then suddenly in some kind of Field of Dreams thing, you see the '27 Yankees, Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Murderers' Row, one of the best baseball teams ever assembled, and it opens your eyes to how the game could be played.

It'd be like having a recipe for macaroni and cheese, but you've only ever had Easy Mac out of the microwave, and then suddenly Ina Garten is there, and she prepares and cooks it, and it opens your eyes to how the dish could be enjoyed.

That's what John means when he says he is writing, on one hand, an old commandment that has been heard many times before, while on the other, he's writing a new one because the true light is shining.

So, when that commandment is something as straightforward as, "Don't hate your brother or sister; love your brother or sister," it means that because of Jesus, we have seen an old commandment, something we've heard before, in a master's hands. Our eyes are opened, and the command to love and not to hate takes on new meaning and new life because of how Jesus embodied and carried out that love to the utmost, to the cross, to the grave. It means that the command is much more than just following a rule. It's about whether we are truly in Jesus, whether we follow him, whether we abide in him, and he in us.

Now if only this commandment were easier.

You see, it's not just John saying, "Love, don't hate." It's more pointed than that. John continues in v. 9: "Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling."

That phrase there "brother or sister," isn't a reference against hating just any other human being or for loving everyone, though that wouldn't be the worst place to start. It's instead an instruction not to hate another believer. That's what "brother or sister" means in this context, another believer in the church. If we hate each other in the church, we are not in the light.

There's this movie from about 15 years ago called "Saved," and it makes fun of what it sees as hypocrisy in Christian culture in a religious high school. One girl named Mary is in a rough patch. Some other girls in the school, led by one girl named Hilary, try to save her by grabbing her off the street and performing an exorcism. Mary protests, confronts Hilary, tells her, "You don't know the first thing about love," at which point Hilary, frustrated and angry at Mary,

yells, “I am *filled* with Christ’s love,” and throws a Bible at her. For some reason that came to mind.

Surely just hatred in general is bad enough, and the world is all too familiar with its effects. Racism, xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, Anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim, white supremacy, just a few of the forms hatred takes in the world around us, and even more sadly just a few of the forms hatred the church has taken toward others in its history. Make no mistake, all those -isms and phobias, they have no place in the testimony of the church.

But what is it about hating a “brother or sister,” that is, hating another believer, that keeps us in darkness?

At various times I confess my own frustration, impatience, resentment, hatred of different branches of Christ’s church.

In one direction, there’s one group, one umbrella that if you asked me at least considers themselves the guardians of the gospel, self-appointed guardians at that, and everything to do with the purity of the gospel falls under their magnanimous oversight. So, you have gospel-centered churches and gospel-centered preaching and gospel-centered worship—it’s like the movie *Spaceballs*, that Mel Brooks send up of *Star Wars*, in which everything in the movie is branded and merchandised, *Spaceballs* the lunchbox, *Spaceballs* the breakfast cereal. Does the church have childcare? Yes. Ah, but is it gospel-centered childcare? Is the church having a potluck lunch? Yes. Ah, but is it a gospel-centered potluck lunch? That’s the kind of disdain I often have toward an entire umbrella of Christ’s church. Never mind that this same group within Christ’s church has reinvigorated a passion for evangelism and engagement in the culture for Christ truly geared toward reaching the lost rather than serving the saved, never mind all that. I don’t see all that. All I see is a bunch of self-righteous, self-appointed gatekeepers who claim some kind of copyright on the word gospel and use it to promote and sell each other’s books and podcasts, and I resent them.

In another direction, there’s another group, more on the other side of the theological spectrum, though that’s probably a tad simplistic, but a group within Christ’s church that seems only interested in one-upping each other with prophetic outrage. If there’s a social or political issue, you can count on them to make sure you hear about it and feel guilty about it. There is injustice here, and if you aren’t outraged and protest, then you aren’t really a faithful follower of Jesus, and then there’s injustice here too, and if you aren’t just as outraged and protest, then you aren’t really a faithful follower of Jesus, and oh there’s injustice here also, and if you aren’t even more outraged and protest even more loudly, then you aren’t really a faithful follower of Jesus. That’s the kind of dismissiveness I have toward this group. Never mind that these voices within the church have consistently called on the church to take stands, stands that 50 years later, the church looks back and says, wow, where was everybody on this one? Never mind that this voice captures the prophetic purpose for God’s people to stand for and exhibit Christ’s kingdom, a place defined by justice and care for the poor and oppressed. Never mind all that. I don’t see all that. All I see is a bunch of sanctimonious, wanna-be prophets more concerned with getting hits on their blogs and social media, than they are in actually effecting any kind of meaningful change in a realistic way. And I resent them.

And that doesn’t exhaust the list for me. Any number of other branches or groups or voices within the church for whom my thoughts often turn to disdain and contempt. I resent them too.

And you know what Scripture has to say about people like me? “Whoever says, ‘I am in the light,’ while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.” “Whoever hates another

believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.”

Kind of goes without saying that hating, resenting, despising, whatever word you want to use, but hating another disciple of Christ somewhat undermines Christ’s commandment to love one another, for we are to be known by our love for each other. And for us to hold hate in our hearts not only keeps us in the dark, but it doesn’t share the light of Christ with anyone else either.

Some of you might be in this boat too. If you’re honest with yourself, you harbor resentment or hatred toward this or that pocket of the church. Maybe it’s a particular person or persons, a well-known preacher or theologian, whose opinions make your blood boil. Maybe it’s a different branch of the church or denomination of the church, and just the label or the acronym causes some visceral reaction within you. Maybe it’s something more personal, maybe it’s a particular person in a congregation you’ve been a part of in the past, or maybe it’s even a person or persons in this very church, folks who you see as having done wrong by you or wrong by the church.

Whoever it is, whenever you see them, whenever you hear them, whenever you read about them, you can’t think about anything else except how wrong they are. Never mind that they too are a disciple following Christ. Never mind that they are a sinner redeemed by grace. You don’t see all that. You only see what you hate, what you resent.

And you know what Scripture has to say about people like us? “Whoever says, ‘I am in the light,’ while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.”

Friends, how can the church, whether it means the broader church or a particular congregation, how can the church and the fellowship of the church flourish when there are pockets of resentment, contempt, and hatred between us? It can’t.

And so, if like me, you recognize that there are quite surely aspects of yourself still in darkness, I invite you, I challenge you, take the first step into the light.

As we did last week, there are small slips of paper in the pews, and what I’d encourage you to do is take one of them, write down a source of resentment, a source of hatred in your life, and give it up to God. Don’t put your name on it or anything, but like this past week, we’ll take what we’ve all written down, and without even reading them, we’ll pray, various groups within the church will pray over what we’ve written, praying without knowing precisely what we’re praying for, but we’ll be praying that we would be free of whatever hatred, whatever bitterness we have, and that we would step into the light.