

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“Real: In the Light”
1 John 1:1-10

We begin a new sermon series as we kick off this new year, a series we’re calling “Real,” and by “Real” we mean, what is true or real fellowship, and what keeps us from it? Now that might sound like a purely social topic, but at its root it’s a decidedly spiritual thing, a God thing. Over the next four weeks, we’ll explore what Scripture has to say about what we put in our own way to knowing true life, life in Christ, life with God, life with each other. And spoiler alert: what it all ends up boiling down to is good, old fashioned sin. Will you pray with me?

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

Early last Fall, we had a series of conversations among our staff, our elders, and our deacons asking this question: what do you sense are some of the spiritual challenges facing our congregation?

There were a whole number of responses, a bunch of different things, but of all the responses we got, the number one subject that kept coming up in conversation after conversation was this: Why do we put barriers up between ourselves? What keeps us from being vulnerable? What keeps us from truly knowing each other? Loud and clear, that was what our leaders sensed.

So what does that say about us? I mean, I’d like to think we’re pretty good-natured and friendly here. These past five months Frances and I have felt so encouraged by the welcome of our church. You know something I love each week in worship. I love that it takes me a time or two saying “Good Morning” over the microphone at the beginning of worship before everyone can settle down, because it means everyone’s greeting each other, talking to each other.

So what does it mean, then, in the middle of what looks like positive, nurturing fellowship for these questions of “Why do we put barriers up between ourselves? What keeps us from truly knowing each other?” to weigh so heavily in the minds of our staff and our officers?

Because fellowship, real fellowship, is something that should be very, very important to us as a church. Having a church without fellowship is a contradiction in terms. The very word for “church” means an assembly, a gathering. It’s what we do.

But even if we say, yeah fellowship is important, sometimes we’ll still make it second class, secondary to big ticket things like the proclamation of the gospel or one’s personal relationship with Jesus. But the way Scripture talks about it, fellowship is anything but secondary. It’s inseparable from the identity and activity of the church.

Look at the opening verses of 1 John. John writes, “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.” To open the letter, John is talking about no less than the proclamation of the gospel, the word of life. This is core stuff here. But then he tells us why in v. 3, “We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the

Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” The reason he says all this about the word of life and the gospel is so that “you also may have fellowship with us.” And that fellowship “is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

Understand the importance of what John is saying here. The very purpose of his ministry, his witness, is so that those who hear it might have fellowship with them, but it’s not just for the sake of hanging out with each other. Their fellowship is nothing less than the fellowship with the Father and his Son Christ himself. The core of his ministry, of declaring the word of life, is inseparable from inviting others into this fellowship with each other and with God in Christ Jesus. It’s all wrapped up in one package.

That means, as we’re talking about fellowship, that we’re not addressing some secondary issue for the church. This is at the very core of what we are called to do.

So if fellowship is so important, what does it mean for our leadership to raise up true fellowship as a spiritual challenge for our church?

Here’s what I think it means. I think it means that we can become so good at being good-natured and friendly—all good things by the way—that it becomes difficult to break the cycle of pleasantries we exchange, and to do so would feel even a bit rude.

Have you ever asked someone “Hey, how ya doin’?” and they actually give you an honest answer? Kind of takes you by surprise, doesn’t it? My grandfather was a deacon in the church, but he also liked messing with people. I take nothing after him. So on occasion he would have a bit of fun with folks. Someone would ask him in church, “Dr. Moseley, how are you doing?” And with a straight face, he would matter-of-factly answer, “I got syphilis.” He didn’t actually have syphilis, but it speaks I think to how shocking and unwelcome it can be when we actually give an answer outside of what is socially pleasant.

On top of that, there’s the pressure to present a calm, collected front, the face of success. No matter what turmoil might be swirling around, everything’s fine, it’s just fine. Put it together, and what you get is a trap, in which on one hand you know in your heart that just saying “I’m doing fine” isn’t anywhere near the truth, but on the other, you feel if you actually do share what’s hurting you, what you’re struggling with, how you’ve fallen short, you’ll be looked at like some weirdo.

And I wonder whether that’s the reason our elders, our deacons, our staff, more than any other issue, brought up this as a challenge facing the fellowship of our church.

And if it’s some comfort, I don’t think it’s just here at Sequoyah Church. I think it’s all over the place, and not just now, but throughout history. It was even a challenge facing the churches John was writing to, it seems, because fellowship and hindrances to it continue to be a key part of what he writes about.

John says in v. 6, “If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 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.” All of these things, walking in the light, having fellowship with each other, fellowship with God, being cleansed from all sin, they’re all connected.

Conversely, walking in darkness, breaking fellowship with each other, breaking fellowship with God, still under the effects of sinfulness, they’re all connected too. What that means is that if we’re talking about what holds us back from true fellowship, from truly knowing each other, the answer, simply speaking, is sin.

Usually we hear the word sin and we want to run for the hills, because we think it means you did something bad, and you should feel bad about it. Now, it’s not like sinfulness is

something we should be proud of, but it's not just a list of all the rules you broke. In fact, the single most common way the Bible speaks about sin is in terms of "missing the mark" or "going astray." You may be familiar with something similar. If you go into a Methodist Church and you pray the Lord's prayer, you'll hear them say, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Trespass, meaning, going somewhere you shouldn't, out of bounds, off the designated path. Yes, in a sense, there's a rule that's broken, but that's not the root of it. There's a path that we could and should be walking, one that we stray from.

John says something similar, but he puts it in terms of walking in darkness, as opposed to walking in the light. Again in v. 6, "If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true."

Walking in darkness does things to us. One story I had to cut from the sermon was about a man who got lost in a cave without a flashlight. But I bring it up in summary here because of what it means to walk in the dark, and I mean pitch black dark. Normally we have all these little subconscious signals, a sense of direction, the sun, the moon, the horizon, all of these signals that help us orient ourselves without our realizing it. But in the dark, and I mean pitch black, like in a cave, they're gone. You can lose track of basic things like backwards, forwards, height, depth, distance, and you can become truly lost.

That's what walking in darkness is. It's when we've lost all those signals that point us in the right direction, and we go astray, we miss the mark. And what we should have been heading for, the light, fellowship with God, fellowship with each other, this word of life, we miss that entirely.

But what if we walk in the light? V. 7 says, 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. But what does that really mean?

It means for one that instead of walking in the shadows, we walk where we can see where we're going, which sounds good. And furthermore, *we're* visible, *we* can be seen, and we can see others. And on one hand, that sounds great. On the other, that sounds terrifying.

It's terrifying because even though it's disorienting in the darkness, there's a weird comfort to knowing that things stay hidden. What would happen if everything came to light, if we are truly known? Would we still be accepted? Would we still be loved? What's tragic is that in the church, the place that should be defined by confession and repentance, grace and forgiveness, the answer we feel to those questions is, "I'm not so sure." And so, we hold back.

I do it too. You want to know what I'm good at, what I'm *really* good at? I'm really good at giving just enough to make you think that I'm confiding in you, but really, I'm not giving the whole story. I'm holding back. Because if I didn't hold back, who knows what people would think about me?

Maybe I'm not alone in doing that.

So, what do we do about it? Our pastoral staff had talked about was some way we might take some of these first steps into the light, so to speak. First, I thought we'd host a public confessional booth, in which everyone would confess their darkest secrets on a microphone, but then Rachel and Mark reined me in. Then they suggested something that I hope many of you will consider doing over the next four weeks. Consider it a first step into the light.

In your pew racks in front of you, you'll see a small purple slip of paper. Looks like this. We'd encourage you to write down some way that has been holding you back from true fellowship, something you feel compelled to hide, something that keeps you walking in darkness. I'd invite you to go ahead and do it now. Write down some way that has been holding you back

from God and from true fellowship. Don't put your name on it or anything. But write it down, fold it in half, and put it in the offering plate as it comes by later. If there aren't enough on your row, just tear them in half and share them.

Once they're collected, we'll read them all aloud and play "Guess Who?" No, that's a joke. What will happen to them is they will stay in a box throughout the week. They won't even be taken out and read. Just baby steps, y'all. But they will be prayed over throughout the week, even though those who pray for them won't actually read them. What we'll be praying for is that we would no longer be held back by whatever is written on these slips of paper, that we would feel the freedom of letting ourselves be known by each other, that we would walk in the light as he himself is in the light, that we would have true fellowship with each other, that we would be as eager to forgive as we would be to seek forgiveness.

Friends, take that first step into the light. Because, ultimately, doing so is at the core of our witness, to each other and to the world, and in doing so, our joy may not hide in darkness, but be complete.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.