

Get Real

Sermon by John Strommen on I John 1:5-2:2 July 1, 2018

In our passage from I John today, we find a paradox: if we are to walk in the light, we must turn to the darkness – our own darkness, specifically. The writer of John makes it clear that walking and living in the light begins with being honest and authentic about who you are. And no matter who you are, you struggle with sin, brokenness and darkness. So it is best to come clean with this. You cannot fake out God, and we'd best not fake out our loved and trusted ones either.

And yet we all develop ways of faking each other out. I suppose everyone has quite a bit of con in them – you know, pretending to be innocent and pure when we're not.

In that spirit, I feel I must make a confession to you this morning. When I was growing up I threw water balloons at passing cars. No, it's true. I don't know why, really. I had a happy childhood. My parents loved me. But at some point I was led astray by water balloons.

Now, it's only fair to point out that this never harmed anyone's car, but you'd never know it from the reaction of most drivers. In fairness to them, they literally didn't know what hit them, so they'd go nuts every time, which was precisely the fun of it. They'd slam on their brakes, get out of the car, and come tearing after us. Now, it's pretty hard to catch a bunch of punks in their own neighborhood, but we still ran with the fear of God anyway, because we knew what it was like to get caught. If they were high school or college age, we knew they'd probably beat the tar out of us. If they were young adults, we'd get a long, stern lecture. But if they were our parent's age, we knew they were in consort with our parents and would therefore bring us to our parents. Risks abounded!

One day, we got set, threw the balloons, hit our target, and "Oh, oh!" A car full of teenage guys. We ran and quickly heard four car doors slam behind us. We ran harder. Then I had a devious thought: "They're only going to run after me if I'm running away, and since they haven't seen me yet, they don't know who I am. Now, if I just double back towards the car and casually walk right by these guys – as they try to figure out where we are - they'll never suspect me. Why would the offender ever walk right up to offended? I'll just leave John Strommen the rascal behind the hedge, and put on my Sunday best real quick.

So that is what I did. I walked back to the car we hit, and sure enough, while some of them were chasing on foot, I ran into two guys who were hanging around there car, looking around, and seemed to be making snarling noises. As I approached, whistling a nervous little tune, they looked at me and said, "Hey! Have you seen any kids running around?"

"No, I haven't. Why? Is something wrong?"

"Well, somebody was throwin' stuff at our car."

"Really? I don't know anyone around here who would do that."

How they failed to pick up on my smugness I'll never know, but I wished them good luck and kept walking right into the safety of my home.

I never did see my friends again.

The reason I tell this story is because often times people do this with church. You know, church is supposed to be for *good people*, so if I'm not actually good, or good enough, I better look the part anyway. Act like I belong. Eventually, I may actually believe this nonsense, thinking I'm pretty good after all – definitely better than him or her!

The writer of John says this kind of self-deception is not only unhealthy, but a sure sign we are not walking in the light. This light, you see, is not merely good deeds and good living; this light is the grace and mercy of Christ, and we can only walk in this light when we are honest about our true nature and all the ways we are compromised.

“If we say we have no sin, the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

That's what the church is: forgiven sinners who keep needing forgiveness.

But wait! Don't we *try* not to sin? Of course. As baptized believers in Christ, we are reborn and called to love God and neighbor. And yet, our broken self clings stubbornly to each one of us in this world. Does any of us hit the mark God intends for us? No, not one - Christian or not. Being a Christian is learning to be real about how compromised we are and then to depend on the grace and restoration of a loving God. This is how we can actually become better people, and it always comes out of gratitude - gratitude for a loving, forgiving God upon whom we are utterly dependent for life and future.

Those who say they really have it figured out and no longer have sin, well, you heard it from our text: the truth is not in them. They no longer need God because they think they've got the instructions they need and they've mastered it. I've often said that one of the most malignant forms that evil takes in this world is self-righteousness – when people believe they have all the answers, are better than everyone else. They're like me with the water balloons, except more dangerous: they actually believe their innocence, so thorough is their delusion. This typically leads not to a loving spirit but a mean one, a judgmental one. For people like this, others quickly become abominations, animals, and other unfortunate names. Love goes out the window.

And so, yes, we are sinners, and, truth be told, hypocrites, too. That, too, is part of our confession.

My mentor and teacher at Luther Seminary, Pat Keifert, once had a conversation with his cynical, agnostic grandfather. His grandfather was grouching about church going folks, how all they were was a bunch of hypocrites.

Pat then said, “You know what the only difference is between them and you, grandpa? They're hypocrites and they know it.” What kind of thing is that to say to your grandpa?! Well, it was the right thing.

Now, of course hypocrisy is a bad thing and we all need to guard against hypocrisy whenever possible, but we will not succeed, because, as Christians, the same standards that any of us impose on others, we will invariably violate. This, too, is what we need to confess.

Now, it cannot be lost in Pat's comment that when non-church folk like to get high and mighty about how non-hypocritical they are, well that's a load of you-know-what, too! This world, without church or God, is even more merciless and unforgiving, because all you have is judgment without grace, where so many struggle with shame for not measuring up; where people are mercilessly put down for any inadequacy; where things are held against you with no forgiveness. Make no mistake, this world without God and without grace crushes the life out of any of us. Look at what social media and cyber bullying does to people!

Which leads me to this point: where in this world can you be real about yourself? In a world that is as harsh and judgmental as it is, where can you be real??

On our Facebook page, I posted a wise saying by Abigail Van Buren:

A church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.

One could add here that church is also a hospital for *those sinned against*. Part of our brokenness is indeed not of our making, but because we have been hurt by the actions or neglect of others. The bottom line is we are broken.

So, how do we do on that count at Mt. Carmel? Is this a safe place to be yourself, warts, struggles and all? This is part of what Luther meant when he held up the importance of the "mutual conversation and consolation of the saints." It means developing relationships with each other that have vulnerability and authenticity.

I can tell you, most churches struggle with this one, and are often more museum or club for the worthy than they are hospital for the broken. I can't tell you how many times members of churches I've served have left the church because they were broken and thought there was no longer a place for them at church. The church of course is supposed to be where good people go. So when your son has trouble with the law, or you are divorced, or you have to go through treatment, well the list could go on. When these things happen, people typically feel too much shame to go to church because they feel they are no longer worthy.

The truth is: no one is worthy, but everyone has immeasurable worth to God. And so, this is or should be a place where broken lives can be supported, encouraged, put back together again.

In many ways, the AA group that meets here is more church than many church events in churches across America. Why? Because AA is a hospital for sinners who own up to this and open themselves to a higher power.

We've all thrown water balloons of mischief in this life and then hid behind a veneer of innocence. No need to play that game here, ever. This is a hospital for sinners. That's you and that's me. How can make

sure people out there know it? How can we fully invite people into this safe space to be themselves and encounter the God of forgiveness and new beginnings? Amen.