

We are now entering into a sermon series on one of my favorite books of the Bible - 1st John. In this brief letter, the author lays out, plainly, all that separates us from God and the love of Christ that has reconciled us back with the father.

1 John is a beautiful and powerful letter that sets up for us how we can share our faith with other people. How many here have ever tried to share your love of Jesus with another person? How did it go? Was it easy or hard?

Some of my first memories of evangelism come from high school - where I was attending youth group at a church that was not where I worshipped and for one of our activities we were sent out in pairs to talk to people in the neighborhood about an upcoming Christian concert and to share with them a track - a brief pamphlet that laid out the case for salvation. Now, I don't know if that work planted a seed that led anyone to Christ at another time, but I can tell you that no one was saved that day as we handed out tracks.

I also remember the first time that I was turned off by evangelism. I was a freshman in college, leading a small group for women at the church located across the street from my dorm in Pittsburg. At Pitt, there is a beautiful and grand academic building with forty-two floors, reaching into the sky, called the Cathedral of Learning. Often people from outside of the university community would gather in front of the Cathedral, because it was recognizable and most of the students had to walk past it to get to class. One day there was a man with a sign on a stick so far up that I don't even know how he was able to carry it, yelling that all of the women at this university were going to hell. I didn't think much about it until some of the ladies in my small group were asking later why he was saying that. His attempt at converting people to faith just made people who already knew Christ confused and hurt.

For the early disciples they could not help but to bear witness - to share the faith that they had, because they had been so deeply changed by their experiences with Jesus. A word that we lift up in the church frequently is transformation - for these early disciples they knew exactly what that meant - to have their whole lives radically changed. They saw and heard Jesus in the flesh. They touched the wounds in his hands that bore the marks of the crucifixion.

Today we have not walked with Jesus in the flesh - we didn't live 2,000 years ago at the time of the incarnation. But we can still be transformed. We still *are* transformed. Because Jesus comes into our lives and does this amazing, incomprehensible work in our lives of forgiveness and opening our hearts to relationship with God. And when that happens to you - no matter when or how it happened - you want to bear witness as well. You want to tell people about Jesus and the joy that he has filled you with.

To which the author of 1 John says this is why we testify. We testify because we have good news, a testimony, a story of unbelievable transformation to tell! The truth is that we all testify to something. We tell the truth, the stories that give evidence to what we believe. Often when we think about testifying outside of the Church, we talk about it in courts of law - the people who are called to the witness stand to say what they saw, perceived or experienced. We, as people who have been transformed by Christ, do this same thing. Only sometimes we get it a bit confused. We think it's about having to say the right thing, or have scripture memorized, or give the most convincing argument. Friends, that is not what sharing *our* testimony is about. It is about what Jesus means *to you*. How he has changed *you*. In other words it's telling your story of your transformative journey with Jesus.

For the author of this letter, he feels compelled to share his faith with people so they may have fellowship with them. What type of fellowship are they talking about? Being bound together by the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The type of fellowship that we talk about each and every time we come to the table for communion and hear the word that we are the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. We aren't in fellowship because of earthly bonds, but because of Heavenly ones. And that is what there is deep joy in. Not just any joy - but joy that has been made complete!

When I was serving up in the Mansfield area, I was blessed to volunteer at Mansfield University as a chaplain. One of the things that I was able to do was lead Bible Studies with students. Every semester, I had a core group of four students, who did not know each other prior to coming to college. But there, they became community, first and foremost because of their faith in their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

That is fellowship that makes our joy complete.

And 1 John wants believers to keep expanding that fellowship. To keep sharing. Not to hold the message in secret - as if in sharing it, their own joy, salvation, and forgiveness would be diminished. No! But to keep telling the story of the one who has brought us from death into life, by the light of his love so that others may receive this good and perfect gift as well!

So how do we find this gift of salvation? To confess our sins. To say that we don't have the answers within ourselves. That we cannot save ourselves, but instead we confess our sins and come to Jesus to offer us forgiveness. In other words to repent - to turn around from our ways that separate us from God and to walk instead with Christ in the way of life.

Now is that work easy? No. Even when we have received the gift of salvation our humaneness makes us prone to wander into sin. But we have also been given the gift of Christian community who we, if we so choose, invite into holding us accountable for the sin in our lives and to pray for us.

When we speak of John Wesley, the founder of the renewal ministry that was known as Methodism, we often equate him with the question how is it with your soul - which is very true. But he also had twenty-one other questions that he encouraged Christians to ask one another as they walked in faith with one another. Questions like "Do I disobey God in anything?" Or "When did I last speak to someone else about my faith?"

1 John invites us to also ask such questions as we seek to be so bound to the heart and love of Jesus Christ that we cannot help but share his Good news with the world. May it be so, my friends. Amen.