Springfield Presbyterian Church

April 11th, 2021

1st Sunday After Easter

In Christ: Our Joy is Complete

1. Setting the Scene

The text that we’ve read this morning might seem a little confusing, at first. It is John’s first letter to churches in Ephesus around the years of 95-110 AD. It is not, in our best academic understanding, that this is the same John we know and love and who authors the Gospel of John. I imagine, since whoever wrote this letter uses language of light and dark and other symbols from the Gospel of John that this is someone who has great respect for the Gospel and the metaphors used within it.

The Scripture that we hear this morning is seemingly simplistic, almost a Christianity 101. We get down to the very basics – God is love, sin is human but in God alone we receive forgiveness, listen to God’s commandments and study them – and believe all of this because we can testify to it. There are no big surprises for someone in the modern day church, because these are root understandings.

1. Sin

But perhaps I’m slimming it down too much, and I can feel it as I speak these words – I am comfortable with God as love, with studying Scripture, with forgiveness – but the sin part makes me distinctly uncomfortable. It is not that I believe that I am sinless or that you are, but the reality is – who wants to talk about sin?

I’m not sure about the environments or faith communities you grew up in, but all have a different take on sin. Sin, at the heart of it, according to Webster dictionary, is an immoral act that goes against God’s law. That definition that is offered though doesn’t cover what I’ve heard from other communities or even my own – for you see, I’ve heard stories of using sin as a way to shame, blame, belittle, and dismiss one another. And for me, that feels like a sin within a sin. In terms of imagery, many have grown up with this concept of Angels as Good and Demons as Sin. You can almost see the fiery blaze and the devil’s pitchfork image. Again, who doesn’t want to run away from that concept – I guess culture had to make sin scary.

1. But what if it wasn’t

And maybe it is a bit scary, in the sense that sin sometimes feels like it snuck up on us – just like it snuck up on Peter when he denied Christ three times over. We can sit in our moral and mortal bodies, doing the very best we can, but sometimes, simply because we are human, we sin. Apart from the well-known collection of sins called ‘the seven deadly sins’ – we can admit that sin is sin is sin. When I do not speak the truth and cause injury to someone else by that lie – I have sinned – I have harmed another child of God. When you clip someone’s car, totally by accident and don’t leave a note – you have not taken the responsibility that is yours to own. When we proclaim Jesus in this sanctuary, but then leave the sanctuary and deny Jesus’ love and role in our life – you and I are sinful – we deny the one who forgives us our sins.

Here is a bigger, more extreme example, but it proves an important point. There was a man named Adolf Eichmann and he was one of the Nazi architects of the holocaust who escaped after World War II to South America, but he was then caught in 1960 and taken back to Israel for a trial. He was indeed tried, found guilty, and executed. But an interesting incident happened during the trial. The court had to find witnesses who saw him commit these terrible crimes against humanity that he was charged with and they needed to find people who saw him participate specifically in atrocities at the death camps. One of the material witnesses was a man names Yehiel De-Nur, and when he came in to testify, he saw Eichmann in the glass booth and he immediately broke down, he fell to the ground and was overcome with sobbing.

This led to an understandable pandemonium as the judge was hammering a gavel to get the courtroom back in order. Sometime later, De-Nur was interviewed by Mike Wallace on the show 60 Minutes. Wallace showed De-nur the tape of him falling down and he asked him why it happened. Was he overcome by painful memories? Or with hatred? Is that why he collapsed? De-Nur said no – and then he said probably something that would shock audiences. He said that he was overcome by the realization that Eichmann was not some demon but was an ordinary human being. De-Nur said, “I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this, exactly like him.”

De-Nur shows a beautiful, striking, and challenging example of self-reflection. We may want to point to others, to claim that their sin is more grievous, but if we were in the same situation, under the same parameters, would we act the same or differently? I’d like to say I would act differently than Eichmann, but that’s from my privileged seat here in the sanctuary. Would you really be able to answer as De-Nur does, would you be able to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. In De-Nur’s reflection, it isn’t that he supports or applauds Eichmann’s actions, not at all, but he does recognize that sin within all of us, in himself, and that in this life, there are situations that will place us right in the helm of discovering who we really are when we are pushed to the limit.

I think De-Nur does a wonderful job of separating Eichmann as a person from Eichmann as a sin. What if, we truly understood that sin was something we did, but not who we are. Sin is an act that happens in a finite moment or collection of moments, and while it is ours to own and take responsibility for, it is not the atoms that make up our body. We believe, and John asserts, that when we ask for forgiveness from God, we know that Christ has made the ultimate sacrifice, the one we just celebrated this past week, and we are continually renewed. We are set free.

1. In Case we forget…

In case you or I forget, Easter is not over, not by a long shot. The Easter celebration is a fifty-day celebration of who Christ is, what Christ has done, and how Christ is renewing us by his death and resurrection. It’s fifty days of Cadbury crème eggs and springtime blooms and joyful shouts of alleluia and rejoicing. Every day in the season is like Easter morning – a morning to remember the life, death, and most of all, resurrection of Christ.

This place, this sanctuary and zoom room has been described by others– it’s a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints. We come to this place to be fully who we are and take joy in whose we are. We come to praise and give thanksgiving, but also to confess and seek forgiveness. We come here not because we are perfect, but because we believe in the God who lived, died, and rose again to make our joy complete.

I’m fully aware that a sermon on sin is no fun, but sometimes it’s those things that we don’t want to talk about, those things of faith, that need to be said even if it makes us uncomfortable. May you know your sin, your immoral act against God’s law, and confess it. May you also know, that in confessing, your sin has been forgiven, you are freed, you are not the sin, you are a sinner seeking to be a better person than you were yesterday and hopefully even more holy tomorrow.

In God’s forgiveness, our joy is complete. Let us testify, as John’s letter does, to God’s love, command, and renewal each and every day, especially this Easter season. Amen.