

“The Word of Life... That You May Have Fellowship”
Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 1:1-2:2;
John 20:19-31

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You can tell that there was a huge impact on the lives of the disciples. You can hear the intensity in this passage from 1st John. He so wants for the people to understand, to believe, to hear what he’s saying. He says, “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked on and touched with our hands.” We can feel how much he wants them to know what he has experienced and knows.

He goes on, “The word of life has come to us. Jesus’ blood cleanses us.” Now that’s a little intense for me. When it reaches this moment when he says the blood of Christ cleanses me, it takes me aback because that’s not a common way of thinking about things in our world today. So it may be the first point where I bump against what are they saying to us? The idea of blood in the ancient Near East was to think about the seed of life or the very human person, flesh and blood, of the person who is there. So one way to think about it is to say *the incarnation of God in Jesus*—the idea that God was really present in the life of Jesus, and in doing that, begin to think about what it means for God to have come, to be with us and among us, to be present and living in our midst, to be one of us, to be real—a real life among us.

It’s interesting to me that we could think about this idea and say *Word*. Now, there’s a slang way of using that and what I discovered is that the slang way of using that comes out of a culture where, when they want somebody to pay attention to what they’re saying, instead of saying “My word is true,” it’s simply shortened to “word.” I think it’s interesting because we think of Jesus as the Word. We think about the word of Christ. We think about the message we’ve been given as the word, that is, as a truth spoken into our lives, a message given us. In fact, in 1st John, he’s talking about the word of life, the truth that is given us about life in Jesus.

It goes on to say the message is, “We have heard from him and proclaim to you that God is light and there is no darkness in him.” This God that comes to be among us is a God in which there is no darkness. There is light.

Now I wonder if we ever struggle with that very idea that God is all light, all good. My sense is that we do. We look at the world around us and we wonder why, if God is good, is the world full of so much struggle. Why doesn’t God just make it all right? God has the power to do that. I think even in that phrase we might begin to hear a hint of why it’s not all right. God would have to *make* it all right. Whereas this is an invitation for us into what is good and right, into the light.

God coming is an invitation into the good. But why is that a struggle for us? One of the reasons I heard recently why we might struggle with the idea that God is good and there is a good outside of ourselves is that oftentimes in today’s world we’re taught that

we don't need anything outside of ourselves. I should be able to know. It's all about *my* will, *my* ways, *my* wants, and the world should pretty much conform to all that. There's nothing I need to conform to. That struggle is with whether I should have to deal with something outside of myself, something that could even shape what's good, for example. Is there a good that I need to conform to?

It's interesting that the word for *sin* is the idea of a target that's missed. There are a couple of things about that in what I was just suggesting. Who makes the target? Who gets to decide what the target is, because deciding what the target is is going to be part of where my efforts to towards that target go. Is it *my* will, *my* wants, *my* way? Or is there some other target I should be looking to and seeing? How easy it is to maybe want to change the target when something more interesting comes up to change it to.

Of course, oftentimes it's not real serious to have my target change. For William Tell, the severity would have been a little higher if the target had changed or been missed. So there are two elements to the target. What is the target, and can I hit it? I think that's what is being talked about in 1st John when he's saying, "We deceive ourselves." We can deceive ourselves about what the target should be or how well I'm hitting it. Or maybe I'm hitting the target really well and it's just a bad target. I'm missing the God-given target, the idea that there is a good beyond us, that there is something that God invites us to.

I think in many ways, the way we find our targets are through what we trust. If you go climbing with someone and you're doing a top-rope kind of climb, somebody will be on the rope climbing and somebody will be on belay. When the person is ready, they will say, "On belay," and the person who is about to climb will say, "Climbing," and the answer will come, "Climb on." The idea is that we create this trust. We know that we are paying attention to each other. In some ways it feels like that's what God is doing in Jesus. He's asking, "Are you paying attention to me? I'm on belay here. Are you going to climb?"

It's a wonderful thing to recognize that we have this trust in God. If you think about climbing and you're up on a cliff or maybe just a big rock and you slip, when you slip and you have somebody on belay you will probably still fall against the rock, but you don't fall to real injury. There is a way in which forgiveness is like being on belay. We may slip, but we're given the opportunity to get back up and try again. We don't fall away.

The other piece to this is that it feels to me like if I can trust in God, if I can trust that God comes in Christ to show us the way, to give us grace, to help us experience God's love, to teach us the way into life and through life and into everlasting life, then there are those moments where I can only see so far. I only know a bit, and sometimes I can't make a ton of sense out of my bit. But it is when I find that it fits with a bunch of others, when things fit together, and it's something I can't always see my way into. One of the things I think God does is continue to give us direction. Jesus teaches us, guides us, shows us the way into life because I can only see a certain bit. But if I want to be part of

the fullness of things, if I want to experience the fullness of life, it is through God's work. God can see the big picture and invites us into it.

One of the pieces of that is fellowship. In each of these passages we read today, we hear it. In Psalm 113, it is written: "How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity." There's this idea of being in fellowship. At the beginning of Acts, the whole group of those who believed were one heart and soul. Heart was the place of decision and attitude, so they had a similar attitude. And one soul—soul is the identity. Who are we? They were one in the way of approach/attitude and one in the sense of identity.

If you think about it, when you are with a group of people where you have that sense of same approach and same identity, there's something that does feel good about that. In 1st John, he says, "We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us," and "Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." There's a sense in that passage in 1st John where it is about fellowship, it is about being together, just as the other passages are about how good fellowship is.

The disciples in some ways knew that they needed to be together after Jesus had died, and so when Jesus came they were together. They had already learned that that was part of who they were.

It's interesting that we get together for coffee fellowship. There's almost a sense that we need something else to have that fellowship around. Coffee is something that many of us enjoy, so let's have fellowship around it. Jesus also does fellowship around the table, and we are going to be around the table today. We have coffee fellowship. We have communion. We have a table fellowship.

It was interesting as I looked at that word for fellowship in Greek, which is the word "koinonia," I always thought is just meant engaging in fellowship. But, you know, if somebody tells you to have fellowship, that's kind of a hard thing to do. It's not open to that direct approach. It's interesting that I found that the word really means "what is shared in common as the basis of fellowship." If it were a disease, koinonia would be the symptom rather than the disease.

What I think this is telling us, in one way or another, is that we are invited into fellowship, but we get there through our trust in Jesus. We trust in a God that is good, that no darkness resides in. God does come among us and invites us to know the grace God gives us, the love God shares with us. We can find our way because we can trust in a God that is on belay, that God is with us. As we do that, we get this symptom—we get fellowship—which is another way that God enables us to know life.

It's interesting how much connection is being noticed today. There's a book called *Lost Connections* that suggests that many of our problems today are because our connections to the reality of our lives and to the people in our lives are broken. It seems to me if we were simply to trust a little bit more, to listen a little bit better, if I walk with

Jesus through scripture and hear his teaching and feel the guidance and take the invitation, then some of this disconnection would never have happened.

We are invited through our faith to live into a fellowship that gives us life, but I probably have the problem that Thomas has. You see, I want things that I can see, I can touch, I can feel. Say you have a promise—a promise that somebody is going to come at a certain time and pick you up and take you someplace that you want to go, but if you don't believe them and don't show up, how are you ever going to experience the promise? I can't touch the promise before it is fulfilled. I can't define it, in some ways. I know where it will lead.

In some ways, that's what I feel this is. Jesus gives us a promise, and invites us into a new life, into a new covenant, into the fellowship of faith. But we will only find it when we show up, when we trust. That seems to me to be what Jesus was telling Thomas. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe [to trust]." Amen.