

“Living Together”
Psalm 133:1-3; Acts 4:32-35;
John 1:1 – 2:2; John 20:19-31

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It says they were gathered together behind locked doors. They were afraid. Jesus had died, had been crucified, and they didn't know what was next for them. And yet, what they did want to do was to gather together. Having followed Jesus, they had become a group. They had become a community. They had become folks who needed to be together. So instead of the fear dispersing them, they gathered together.

It was as they were together that Jesus comes among them and says, “Peace be with you.” They gathered together and encountered the risen Jesus. In some ways, we do that every Sunday. We gather together to encounter the risen Jesus. Perhaps we don't see Jesus directly saying, “Peace be with you,” yet through the scriptures and through our prayers and through our music and through our time together I often feel that encounter with Jesus, the risen Lord. There is something about being together because of our savior that makes a difference.

In that gathering he had with the disciples, he invited them to recognize the peace he brings. Peace be with you. It is an interesting thing to think that as a gathering of disciples, one thing we might expect to be finding is peace with us. Perhaps this is the beginning of a description of what it means to live into the resurrection—to hear Jesus invite us to receive that peace, that shalom, that ability to live together in harmony.

In many ways, I think the 1 John passage is one of those passages that is inviting us to live into the resurrection. It describes Jesus as the one who brings us the word of life. I think about living into the resurrection as living into the positive instead of the negative. It's so easy in our world to pay so much attention to what's wrong and here it feels like an invitation to hear the word of life, what's good, what's possible. It's a contrast to the human fear and jealousy and divisiveness that I have talked about as leading to vilification, viciousness, and violence.

It's a contrast because it says that as he brings us the word of life, we might have fellowship together. It's that idea of being together in peace, living together as Jesus' disciples, gathering in fellowship, and caring for one another. That contrasts with so much of what I feel like I see in the world today: the divisiveness, the fear and uncertainty.

How do we get along? Jesus invites us into a word of life, to have fellowship together. It is what we do on a Sunday morning. We come that we might hear that word in scripture and in prayer, in our music and in our lives. I'm also reminded that

Jesus says we will encounter him as we help the least of those among us. He says as we do that we will encounter him. We will be helping him. The description of the Acts community is about a community doing their best to help and encourage one another to think about what it means to be in fellowship.

I think I've always had a desire to be in fellowship. I remember when I was in college, I was in a campus community ministry that became a place of real fellowship for me. In some ways, it was that taste of fellowship that has led me to always want the joy of sharing that time and conversation, eating meals together and living life together. In some ways it would be really nice to stop right there with that vision of living into the light of fellowship and grace, thinking we will just always get along with one another.

But even 1 John doesn't stop there. He goes on to suggest that it may not be so easy to do because we need to confess our sin. The trouble is we have a reluctance to admit when we do things wrong – our own sin, our own brokenness, our own mistakes. It says if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. We say that every week before our prayer of confession because we are invited to recognize that what gets in the way is if we say we have no sin, if we deceive ourselves, and if the truth is not in us. We need to admit our sin, individually and corporately.

We need to admit the way we have made mistakes of violence. Throughout our history, we can look back and see how we try to remove or contain people who seem to be a problem. We used violence against the Irish when they came over during the famine. We used violence against the Italians when they came over. We used continued violence against the Native Americans and against the blacks who were brought against their will to be among us, and that has continued. We need to admit that. We need to confess we continue to vilify in a way that separates.

Today, we vilify the right or we vilify the left, or we vilify somebody, and in doing so, we create brokenness. We are invited to confess our sin. So that's the corporate side of it. But we also do it individually. We hold grudges. We have ill will toward someone. We decide that we can not treat somebody with politeness, or we just don't want to be with a certain group of people.

Jesus invites us to confess our sins, and it comes out in this 1 John passage. If we confess our sins he, who is faithful, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. I ponder over that phrase a lot. What does it mean for Jesus to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness?

As I sometimes do, I went back and looked at what the original Greek word for "forgiveness" means. Sometimes, we just think about forgiveness as forgetting our

sins. But it's interesting the word for "forgiveness" could also be a declaration of or a sending away by bringing something forward, bringing it out, and sending it off. That's basically the idea behind that word. It feels to me like when we are told that Jesus forgives our sins, it's a bringing our sins to the surface in a way that allows us to say no to them and send them away. So we move away from our sins because we know they are sins. We recognize them. We see them.

The idea of cleansing us from all unrighteousness is kind of the same idea. There's a sense that Jesus sees our dirt. He's got the dirt on us. But what he does about that is to wash it away, so that we live a new way. The invitation is that in the confession, in the recognition is to wash it away, to find a new way, the way into resurrection.

Instead of silence and superficiality and suffering, Jesus invites us to fess up so that we can be faithful (trustworthy), and live in fellowship. It is as we look again at what Jesus did, as he walked into the very depths of human sin, revealing how we will blame the innocent victim and cause suffering and death. We sacrificed his life to our sin. He is able to take that idea of atoning sacrifice – the expiation, to make amends, reparation for our guilt, our wrongdoing – and insert forgiveness. It is a way of saying that God doesn't hold our guilt against us, but invites us to have it washed away so that we can live differently. Not that we're not ever going to sin, but we have this process. We have a way of confessing. We have a way of seeing the wrong in our midst, the wrong in our own lives, and that seeing begins to change us so that we might begin to live into the light.

As we live into the light, he invites us to live together. So the word of life is a word that brings us into fellowship. The silence and the superficiality and the suffering that breaks relationships divides us, isolates us, and leads us to places of despair. Jesus does the opposite. He calls us together. He calls us to the table so that it can become a place of confession, faithfulness, and fellowship that helps us see the word of life, the life God gives us.

It is the risen Christ that calls us together, engages us with the very peace Christ would give us, peace amidst our fears. It is Christ's word of life that opens the way to fellowship as an alternative to the world's brokenness. The opportunity to be in fellowship becomes a reality through confession, faithfulness to God and to one another, and a love for one another that sprouts peace and creates fellowship. The table is a place that reminds us that in our struggle with confession and faithfulness and fellowship we have the advocate in Jesus who leads us, invites us into confession, faithfulness and fellowship.

As we begin to think about what it means to live into the resurrection, this passage from 1 John invites us to hear the word of life, to be in fellowship with one another, and to know the grace of God. Amen.