

“We Walk in the Light”

“How Shall We Live” – part 1 (umcdiscipleship.org)

1 John 1:1-2:2

[Title slide] *Welcome, Prayer*

[Teamwork] As we start exploring God’s word together today, I’d like to ask a question. When have you felt the power of a community or a group of people? It could be from sharing their common faith, their purpose or goal. Let’s hear some answers.

[Mikado cabin] One of my best memories was building a cabin with my family. Except for the foundation, every board, every nail, every shingle was installed by my family and our friends. In fact, for most of high school, my socialization involved inviting someone to come up and work on the cabin with us.

There are some home repairs you can do on your own. But most projects are faster, safer, and more fun when you do them with someone else.

[Jesus teaching] I believe the Christian faith is the same. We have a huge tendency in our society to emphasize individual faith. The historical evangelical push is to ask, “Are you saved?” Yet I find that the Bible rarely speaks solely to the individual. More accurately, the Bible describes God’s involvement with his people, plural. The Bible records conversations within communities of faith, where all worship and live together. Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a banquet, not a Happy Meal at the drive thru for one.

When we join with others, we feel synergy – the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Remember what it felt like to be part of that community. This is what God wants for us in the church as well.

[Easter symbols, tomb] Today, the first Sunday after Easter, some pastors call “Low Sunday.” Last Sunday was amazing. We had breakfast and bells, egg hunts, music, and good news. Today it is natural to feel a little down after all that excitement. We might be asking, “What’s next? How do we top that?” It can be tempting to slip into that mentality, especially if we feel it’s only about us as individuals.

The truth is, every Sunday is a communal gathering to celebrate the Resurrection. Christians gather on the Lord’s Day to celebrate Jesus, no matter where or when they were, and we do it together.

[Jumping] So if each Sunday is a celebration of the Resurrection, if we know Jesus died and rose again, then what do we do next? If the Resurrection is life-changing, what should we do? There is an old story of the evangelist who preached to his congregation: “I don’t care how high you jumped on the night you got saved, I want to know how straight you walked when you came back down.”¹

We all were jumping and clapping last week. What about today? How will we walk? The first letter of John in the New Testament points us towards a communal response. Together, we will walk in the Light.

[Scripture] Note John’s use of plural pronouns from the very beginning of his letter. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.” (1 John 1:1)

Imagine for a moment that you were the apostle John. Most of your friends have died. You have an amazing church, yet most of them never met Jesus face-to-face. But you did. You saw, you felt, you touched Jesus. And you are the last of your generation. When you pass away, all others will rely on secondhand information about Jesus.

So what do you write? How do you record your thoughts so that future generations will know your testimony? And what if you only have 2500 words – the length of one sermon – to record it all? What would you say? Nearly 2000 years later, we read this letter and try to understand. It’s like we have a time machine – through John’s words, we can still be a part of his community.

[Scripture] All throughout the letter, John says, “we”. Again in verse 4, John says, “We write this to make our joy complete.” John is writing on behalf of his community – the original apostles and others who came to know Jesus through them. Maybe we have mislabeled this letter. Maybe it’s not “The First Letter of John.” Maybe it’s “The First Letter of John and Jane and James and Mary

¹ Rev. Kristina Sinks, of umcdiscipship.org

and Peter and Johanna.” John may have picked up the pen and paper, but the voices of his entire community were in it.

[Statue of Jesus] John writes to share his confidence and wisdom with readers of all generations. John’s church was at a crossroads. As the first generation of Christians passed away, there was a torch to pass, a faith to bequeath. There were also threats to that faith, including heresy, false teachers, and those who would divide the church or subject it to narrow, exclusive, almost secret doctrines. Sounds a bit like today, doesn’t it?

So what did John mean, walk in the Light? He meant for us to follow Jesus. To understand Jesus was the Son of God – fully divine and fully human. Jesus died on a cross to save the world. To walk in the Light means to embrace that truth, which is a hard thing to do, because it requires humility, confession, and faith.

[Scripture, Earth, fingers] Confession is something I think historically the Church, with a capital C, has not excelled at. For example, take verse 5: “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5) That’s a beautiful statement, very poetic and full of hope. It has also been used to discriminate and tolerate racism.

Our first reaction, my initial reaction, is to say, “Wait! Hold on! I’ve never done that.” That’s all well and good, but we belong to a community, to a nation, that constantly struggles with Christian nationalism and white supremacy. I’m not pointing any fingers this morning, but I am saying, to be in authentic, Christian community, means to point out the areas where we all can do better, where we all need to repent of the sins of the past, corporately. To ignore or dismiss those sins is a disservice to our faith, to Jesus, and only continues to harm our brothers and sisters who have suffered and still do. To walk in the Light, we need to confess all our darkness.

[Scripture] That brings me to my favorite section of this passage, verses 8 and 9. “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:8-9). There’s good news and bad news. The good news: We’re all sinners. Go ahead and confess. It’s healthy. And

the bad news: If the fact that “everyone is a sinner” is your only good news, you’re in trouble.

The problem in today’s world is not that we claim to be sinless. I think the issue is, we claim our sins aren’t a big deal. I read this a lot in the news, particularly of celebrities, whose lives we often put under a magnifying glass. When a celebrity does something criminal or unethical, whether it’s words they say or actions they take, too often, instead of apologies, we hear excuses. Either they explain away their sins, or they use the excuse, “Everyone else does it, too.” That’s not the Christian faith, friends.

All sin has consequences. Visible and invisible. Things we can see affecting us and others, and the hurts we can feel in our souls. Those consequences add up. Sin brings depression, self-justification, and more compromise. Either we deal with it, or it grows.

[Two people sitting] There is more good news, though. We have the answer to deal with our sin, but it takes humility and vulnerability. It’s not easy to go to someone and say, “I’ve got a problem; I need to tell you something.” It’s the hardest thing in the world to do. I’d rather do a polar plunge in the lake than tell someone how I’ve messed up, spoken words I can’t take back, watched, listened, partook in something I knew I shouldn’t, missed opportunities to be kind and generous and build up the kingdom of God. It’s even harder to be completely humble and repentant before the holy God Almighty. But it is the best thing you could ever do.

There is one other part of this passage that gives me hope, that helps me walk in the Light better with my brothers and sisters. Let me read two verses again for you.

[Scripture] 1 John 2:1-2 - “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Here is the conundrum. Christ frees us from our sin, yet we are still sinners. How do we make sense of this paradox?

The answer is this: God knows us. God knows all of our shortcomings, all of our doubts, weaknesses, and failures. And Jesus still advocates for us – he pleads on our behalf, like a defense attorney. Jesus doesn’t make excuses for us, he redeems us with his own blood. Jesus’ sacrifice didn’t stop us from sinning, not completely, but it does remove from us the desire to sin. That’s what it means to walk in the Light. And that gives me hope.

One other ray of hope: John says, Jesus not only died for us, but for the sins of the whole world. That sounds similar to the famous verse, John 3:16, which says God so loved the whole world, that he sent his one and only son. The whole world. Not just an elite or exclusive group of individuals who pray a certain way or answer correctly to a list of questions invented hundreds of years after the cross.

Jesus died for the whole world. All are forgiven. And while that forgiveness is freely offered, God in his wisdom still gives us a choice. We can choose to receive it. We can choose to worship him. We can choose to walk in the light.

[Title slide] Walking is something we do, not something we believe. In the Christian faith, we often talk about the relationship of theology and actions. Theology matters. What we believe and how we teach it is crucial. How we live it out matters even more. I heard someone say once, “Right action wins over right theology every time.” You can be the best preacher ever, but if you walk in sin and darkness and refuse to love your neighbor, that’s a terrible witness. On the other hand, you might be the weakest Christian that ever saw the light of day, but you love your neighbor as yourself, you live to out-give others, and you stand in the gap for those with no voice. Friends, that’s the gospel. That’s walking in the Light. That’s why Jesus lifted up the Good Samaritan and the tax collector in the temple. I don’t care all that much how well you know your Bible. I care how much you live what it says.

John tells us, together, to walk in the Light. Don’t just believe in Jesus, but really try to follow him, even though we will still all mess up. That’s why I love verse 9 so much. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Believe his promises. Jesus cleanses us from all unrighteousness. Walk in the Light, together, friends. Let's pray. (Use the prayer of confession on the screen.)

Memory Verse: John 8:12

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Reflection Questions

1. When have you confessed something, even though it was hard? How did that situation go? How did you feel after you confessed?
2. Jesus says he is the Light of the world. What types of actions did Jesus do that were acts of light? What acts of light do his followers still do today?
3. What are some areas of darkness in your life? In the world? How might Jesus bring his light into those places?
4. Why is community an important part of bringing the light of Jesus to others? How does our church do that?
5. How does Grace UMC uniquely add to the community of Christian faith around us?