

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious loving Creator, a week later, our Easter continues. Although we leave the celebrations of that day behind, the reality you teach us is that Easter is more than one day. It is a season to celebrate. It is every Sunday we remember the gift of new life. It is a lifestyle to foster everyday. It is a choice in every moment. We rejoice in that choice we wish to make again in this house of worship, to allow the new life of Jesus Christ to abound in our hearts. All too often, God, we rely upon Christ to choose us and to move us, but that choice was made centuries ago, eons ago. It remains our responsibility to choose a life with Christ, to choose belief, to choose commitment to the life and the calling that we have undertaken. Hear our prayers, our confessions, and our supplications, O Great God.

We want to be children of the light, Holy God. We want to be children who confess our sin and live in harmony with our neighbors. But, Holy God, our pride and self-righteousness often gets in the way, and we neglect your way. We seek to lift up ourselves as better examples by making the sins of others seem greater than ours or say to ourselves that we do not sin in your eyes. Neither is the truth, Holy One. Remind us, Gracious God, of the image of Christ: we cannot love another that we are pushing down for our own benefit. Lead us to humility and the strength that comes from the way of Jesus Christ. It is not easy, Holy God, but you do not call us to a life of ease; you call us to a life of commitment. Let us keep these things in mind as we pray the prayer that our Lord taught us, saying together...

SERMON

The way of the world in 2015 is self-satisfied superiority. Everyone wants to be better than the next person, and we'll do anything to make sure that's proven. Everything amounts to why my preferences, my beliefs, my way of life, everything about me is better

than you. It's definitely the way of politics. Republicans use statistics and bumper sticker slogans to demonstrate why Democrats are worth slime. Democrats use statistics and bumper sticker slogans to demonstrate why Republicans are horrible. Every news channel takes every opportunity to show why the other opposing news channels have neglected the most important stories. Each party labels the other party as hypocrites. The Green Bay Packers look down on everyone because they are seemingly the model franchise with thousands of owners, when in reality, they are more self-important and egotistical than anyone else. Just kidding, but seriously. Everywhere we go in the world, there is the desire to show why that person is no good because of this and this, and that makes me a better person because of it. Not only does that bring others down, it is unfortunately the way that those who say such things try to lift themselves up. And no one is immune, even those who follow the way of Jesus Christ. These walls do not prevent us from the subtle allure of judgment and bringing down others to make ourselves feel self-righteous.

In this age, it's too easy to be judgmental people. Let's face it, it feels so good! You see someone walking down the street wearing something ugly, so it's satisfying to laugh at them with a friend. Someone you work with says something off-putting or foolish, so it makes us feel so great to tell a friend much of a jerk they are. Looking down on others is an easy and fulfilling past time until we ultimately realize it is a bankrupt hobby, and it hurts us just as much as them. Even more so, it's against God's way. It has no place in the church of Christ, for Christ came to teach us to love one another. Mocking another person or talking about them behind their backs has no fragment of love in it at all, and it does not promote the growth of God's Kingdom on this earth. That is an important message from 1 John today. Through the next few weeks, let's walk through the Epistle of 1 John and see

how to live well through some of its key ideas. This morning, we start with the beginning of the Epistle. The author speaks of sin, honesty, and light and dark. This morning, let us see how we often suffer from very pesky sins and what it means to live in the light by looking at the wisdom of the scripture and what it means to how we live everyday.

The Epistle of 1 John is a special Epistle, probably not written by the same author who composed the Gospel of John. Its mission is to reconcile a broken congregation, according to the New Interpreter's Commentary. This letter aims to be pastoral while reconfirming some important truths about the life we lead. Conflict can separate us from the basics of living the faithful Christian life. With that mission in mind, it goes back and focuses on the foundations of being a Christian and what it means to be the church. The messages are about personal choices and choices we make as the church. It all begins with how we relate to one another as children of God. It's a message that asks us to be truly honest with ourselves so that we can be honest with each other, and it is just as timely today as it was several hundred years ago.

It strikes on a point that we still seem to question today, so let me ask you: have you sinned lately? Unless your name happens to be Jesus Christ and I didn't notice you walking in this morning, the answer should be "yes." But I wonder how you may have reacted to that statement. Did it cause shame? Did it cause you to be offended that someone would ask? Or are you perfectly at peace with your answer? That's probably a key to how we see ourselves and others. It's just a fact of life that to be human is to sin. Any time we break relationship with ourselves, our neighbor, or God, we have sinned. In other words, any way that we talk about or treat ourselves or our neighbors in ways that do not respect them as nothing less than God's blessed creation, then we have sinned. Any time we look down on

another in self-satisfying superiority, we have sinned. Any time we mock another person, we have sinned. Any time we talk about another person behind their back, we have sinned. Any time we bring another person down to lift ourselves up, we have sinned. On the other hand, any time we look in the mirror and hate what we see, someone created lovingly in God's image, we have sinned. Any time we have lifted our own agendas at the expense of God's agenda, we have sinned. And more often than not, it is because we make ourselves the most important thing. It is not worthy of the Lord we serve, and that does not grow the Kingdom on Earth.

On the one hand, we should not continually live in defeat or put ourselves down because we are sinners and we continue to sin. On the other hand, it's not an excuse to rest on our laurels of grace and act as if it's no big deal. New life is an invitation to continually do and seek better. If there's one message of this passage, it is clear that as children of the light, children of the Creator God, we are called to be children of truth. The two sides of light and darkness working throughout this first chapter alludes to lives of truth and lies. To live in truth is to live in the light. To live in a lie is to live in the darkness, and in God, there is no darkness at all. When we confess that we are sinners and the sins in our lives, we live as children of the light, and there is grace and forgiveness there. It allows us to better live with empathy in light of the difficulties of others. If we say we are without sin, if we look down upon others in our own self-righteousness, and that in itself is a sin.

As you may know, I am a dyed in the wool Chicago Bears fan. It is something that draws me closer to other members of my family. I know that many of you can relate. I've spoken to several of you about the Broncos during the season, and I've heard stories of how watching the Broncos on TV was what you did to stay close to members of your families. I

believe that being a sports fan is like being a Christian: it is an endless source of hopefulness. How else do you explain Cubs fans? At the same time, like our Christian faith, we can misuse it to hurt others. In my worst moments, my desire to cheer for my team becomes a means to think less of or spite other because they cheer for the opposing team. It often happens on the inside, which isn't good in itself, but I can be tempted to take it out. When the Bears played the Broncos at Mile High in 2011, I was there. I saw the Bears go up by a slim margin, then watch as "Tebow Time" claimed another victim. As I left the stadium, many people mocked me for the Bears' loss. After all, we got beat by Tim Tebow, but let's face it, it was really the Broncos defense that won the day. Even though I love the Broncos, it was making me starting to feel spiteful and angry for the way they were hammering I really cared about. It was sad how ungracious winners many fans were that day. I wanted to fling things back at them, but I chose to congratulate their win. Hey, the Broncos were the better team, and the Bears didn't lock it down when we needed to. When I chose to congratulate them, I threw water on my anger and changed my perspective. I am glad I made that choice that day, but other days I have not been so loving. I have said things across the years that have damaged relationships by carelessness, spitefulness, and not taking a moment to think. It has happened before, and I imagine it will again, but when we remember how we fall short, it prevents us from judging the fallings of others harshly.

Unfortunately, the greater church often forgets to be humble. Within the church, every size, age and location, one of the greatest desires is to grow the congregation. Often, so much energy is devoted to making the congregation the most attractive place it can be with specialized ministries, small groups, and so forth. This is the case in just about every church you can imagine. These are not bad things in themselves, but the church can get so

focused on that mission that we can lose sight of the basics and forget our holy callings. This was the point of 1 John. We must expand the church's mission without forgetting the very heart of the matter: the church cannot make disciples of Jesus Christ without the focus of being people of love at all times. One of the greatest tragedies of Christianity today is how we are perceived by the rest of the world, which is very important if we want to be disciple-makers. We are seen by those outside the church not as messengers of God's great love but as judgmental and self-righteous. The church is seen as looking on the sins of others as greater than its own, when this passage and the life we have been called to is not that way. If the path of Jesus Christ, as scripture says, is not to "condemn the world" but he came so that "the world may be saved through him," why is the Christianity of today shutting off others to the message of Jesus Christ? If the church is seen more as judgmental than loving, we must humbly focus again on Christ's mission to show him to the world.

It all starts with the smallest choices. A song that has touched my Christian Journey is the Chris Rice contemporary Christian song, "The Face of Christ." It's his journey of humility. He speaks of so many people we tend to look down upon, such as the homeless man with a tattered sleeping bag or the convict spending decades in prison and reflects with new eyes on their situation. He realizes that we have no choice where we were born or the situations we were born into, and so he looks on those people with compassion. It is not our place, he realizes to judge them for their wrongs. We have not lived their lives; we haven't walked in their shoes, but we can treat them with love. We should treat them as if they were Jesus Christ. How would you treat Jesus if here were here today? It puts things into perspective. He says that God has placed us here and with so many blessings. That should spark gratitude, never superiority.

Let's be honest with each other: there will always be people that we naturally don't like for whatever reason. We're human beings, but how we respond to that part of our humanity is what matters. We always have a choice. You may look down upon someone for their political beliefs, their upbringing, their attitude, or anything else. It may seem justified in that moment or you may know pretty clearly it is just petty. Any way it is, to be in these walls means that we are continually striving toward something greater, something better, something more in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. The Epistle of 1 John testifies to the truth: we are all sinners, we have all fallen short, and we sin everyday in big and small ways. We must be honest with ourselves in that truth. We must remember that whenever tempted to look down on God's beautiful creations for things we are liable to do ourselves. We are called instead to be children of the light, fully honest with ourselves, others, and God and recognize we often fall short in the same ways we mock others for doing. When we are more honest with ourselves, then we are less liable to be people of judgment and more able to be people of Christ's love and grace. Let us live in this world with caring, with open hearts, and with an attitude worthy of the saving power of Jesus Christ! Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.