

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**1 John 1:8-9, “Prepared in Worship: Repentance and Confession”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/23/2017**

This is our third in a series entitled, “Prepared in Worship.”

The idea of this series is to highlight the ways in which  
particular elements of our worship service prepare us for life with God  
in our everyday life.

We also find that these elements aren’t just nice things we like to do,  
but that they emerge directly from the rhythms and patterns of spirituality  
we find in Scripture.

This is all part of our Worship into Life project that we received a grant for  
from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship.

To officially kick off this project, after our service today  
we will have a great lunch and learn a prayer practice  
that will help us reflect on our worship in a deeper way.

This is going to be something we use many times over the next year.

But that’s later. Right now we’re looking at the practice of repentance  
and confession, and we’re using a passage from 1 John chapter 1.

1 John comes from a unique Christian community –  
one that is distinct from the others that we come to know  
in the pages of the New Testament.

This is early theological reflection from the church,  
perhaps from around the year 100 AD.

You may be surprised to learn that John is not named as the author –  
the author just calls himself “the elder.” But early church tradition  
connects the letter with an elder named John.

Whether this elder is also the apostle, the person who wrote the Gospel of John,  
and/or the person who wrote the book of Revelation are topics  
that I don’t think we want to explore in detail this morning.

So let’s simply call him elder John in accordance with the tradition.

This short book is also unique in that it is not a letter.

There is no greeting or blessing or thanksgiving to open 1 John  
as we find in the other letters of the New Testament.

So this is more like a sermon.

A written teaching to address a particular situation.

In John's community, there were false teachers who were pulling followers  
of Jesus away from the gospel of the apostles.

So this document is written to get back to the basics

of what it is to know and love God

in and through Jesus Christ

and with the affirmation of the Holy Spirit.

One of those basics is also one of our consistent elements in worship:

Repentance and Confession. In confession, we name the places

we have fallen short. In repentance we actually turn around

and go another direction.

Confession is typically the focus of our worship service,

repentance happens in the course of our daily lives.

To get there, we need to have some sense of what John is doing

in this opening chapter. The focus for John is the Word of life,

which was from the beginning, and which was experienced in full:

hearing, sight, and touch.

In v. 3 John says this document is a proclamation of what "we"

have seen and heard for the purpose

that you also may have fellowship with us.

The overall aim for John is reconciliation.

The aim is healing what is dividing these communities.

The aim is being one in fellowship

with God the Father and Jesus Christ.

True fellowship cannot be had on any other basis.

After this prologue, John begins to speak about the "back to basics" message  
that he hopes will unite them:

That God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.

What does this mean, that God is light?

I. Howard Marshall notes that there are two primary ways  
in which light is associated with God in the Old Testament:

One is the flawless perfection of God's holiness.

Light from the sun, in our daily experience of it,  
is one of the purest and cleanest things we encounter.

You can put up a pretty colored window for it to go through  
and change it that way, but the original light itself is pure.

And that's part of what God is like, for, as John says in v. 5,  
"in him there is no darkness at all."

But that's just the first aspect.

The other aspect is that **"light provides illumination in dark places  
and is an appropriate symbol for the way in which God  
reveals himself to humanity to show them how to live."**

Light reveals things that would otherwise be hidden.

And God is also like that. God opens up and reveals  
the good way of living that brings joy and reconciliation.

Both aspects are in play in our passage, but I would suggest to you  
that many of us (myself included) have only remembered the first one  
– that God is holy and pure, and we have neglected the second one –  
that God reveals and shows the way.

In v. 6, John says if we claim to have fellowship but walk in darkness,  
**"we lie and do not live out the truth."**

Living in darkness is life without proper illumination from God  
about where we should go. It's the life of self-centered foolishness  
which the wisdom of the Proverbs warns us against.  
Living in darkness is living without the God who is light.

In the simple terms of this faith community, the alternative is clear:

1 John 1:7 – **"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light,  
we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus,  
his Son, purifies us from all sin."**

We have considered what it is for God to actually *be* light ...  
what then does it mean for us to "walk *in* the light.?"

It's clear to me that walking in the light is having our lives – sin and all – illuminated by the presence of God.

Walking in the light is having the light of God shine on us  
and we do not hide from it.

Here is another quote from I. Howard Marshall:

**“As soon as a person comes into fellowship with God, he will become conscious of his sin; the very thing which separates him from God is shown up in the light. What is he to do? He may simply dodge back out of the circle of light into the darkness because he knows that his deeds are evil, and he does not want them to be shown up. Alternatively, he comes, sin and all, into the light, and to his amazement discovers that the dark blemishes disappear.”**

Now that's it. That is walking in the light. Not “doing the right things,” but allowing God to shine on all the wrong things,  
and submitting to the grace and love of Jesus.

Now we come to the verses we read earlier, vv. 8-9,

**“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves  
and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins,  
he is faithful and just and will forgive us.”**

The logic of this verse implies that walking in the light has to do with  
*admitting our sin...*not merely to do with *living in a sinless way.*

Now, who would be so stupid as to show up before God and claim to have no sin?

I mean, really. Does anybody here think they don't sin?

Well, then I guess we've got this verse figured out!

But there might be more to consider. George Stroup suggests that Christians

“may say they are children of light,  
but they are self-deceived when they say they have no sin.

They are caught in a vicious cycle of self-deception  
from which there is no escape.

To be self-deceived is to be unable to recognize one's own deception  
and to be unable to recognize the truth about oneself.”

What I hear in this is that we “claim to be without sin” whenever we  
fail to recognize the areas where sin has a grasp on us.

This doesn't happen as often with sex, violence, drinking, stealing, and murder.  
Those things we pretty well know when we've done them.

It's in the more subtle categories, like pride, conceit, jealousy,  
and idolatry.

For an example, sins involving wealth and power  
are typically reliant upon such self-deception.

We who are rich actually have nothing to worry about  
compared to those at the bottom of the economic food chain.  
Would you agree?

Even so, we deceive ourselves by telling a story  
in which we who are in control are turned into the victims.

It is within such a setting that we say to God, "In this matter, we have no sin!"

And that, believe it or not, brings us to our worship service!

How? Well the purpose of our confession in worship is to try and reveal  
some of our self-deception that develops over the week.

This is why we don't merely say,

"Take some time to confess your sins to God quietly."

We provide an actual prayer of confession because

*we probably don't know what our sins are without some help!*

The hope is that praying these prayers together provides us  
with more range and unique perspectives on our sin  
than we will be able to come up with on our own.

In the book that you will finally be able to pick up after service,

Pedagogy of Praise, Jeffrey Greenman points out

that there is a difference between legal repentance,  
which says, "If you repent you will be forgiven,"  
and evangelical repentance, which says,

"Christ has borne your sins on the cross, therefore, repent!"

In the legal way of looking at it, we have to convince God to forgive us.

But that's not the gospel. The gospel is that God's goodness and love  
leads us into repentance and confession.

And so that is why we pass the peace of Christ and sing God's praise first,  
and then we come into confession.

God stands ready to forgive even before we say the words.

Eventually, repeating these kinds of prayers every week  
should soak into our subconscious, so that we more naturally  
walk in the light of God  
which reveals things in our life and world for what they are.

The key in all of this is that we must be transparent before God and one another –  
not pretending to be more than we actually are.

We must find safe spaces to build trusting relationships  
that stand the test of time.

Those relationships should include some people whose views and backgrounds  
are quite different than our own – because those are the only people  
who can call us out on our self-deception!

And then, because of the forgiveness we receive in confession and repentance,  
we celebrate together, we grieve together,  
we have hard conversations when we disagree about something,  
we share life at a deep level.

I hope you can agree that our practice of confession is  
deeply related to our relationships with one another and our life in the world.

When we come to this time in our worship, I hope that you can enter into it fully.  
Go to those places of obvious wrongdoing and share them boldly with God.  
But also look for those places of self-deception, ask the Spirit of God  
to reveal them to you.

Remember that there is never a reason to fear when we come in confession,  
for in Christ we are already forgiven.

He has accomplished our forgiveness through the cross.