### “Peace Be with You” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Apr. 7, 2024

**1 John 1:1–9**

1We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— 3we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true . . . 8If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

**John 20:19–23, 30–31**

19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said . . . 21“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. . .”

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Good morning and welcome to First Church. We are beginning to see signs of spring, and this is welcome. Spring often means new beginnings or changes. Today we learn about the changes that came to the apostles in their spiritual lives after Jesus had risen.

What I see in both our Scriptures is a focus on Jesus’ intimacy with his disciples. John the Apostle speaks of knowing, hearing, seeing, touching, and having fellowship with “the word of life” (1 John 1:1). The gospel passage has Jesus visiting them while they are still locked away “for fear of the Jews” (John 20:19), and pantomiming the pouring out of the Spirit upon them. The *actual* Spirit-outpouring was on Pentecost, so I think this was a symbolic act here, foretelling what would soon happen to them. He prepares them for the coming of the Spirit, just as he was always preparing them for challenges to come.

John, in his letter, stresses that Jesus revealed the life of the Father. Jesus taught them that “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). If we walk with God in our spiritual journey, then we walk in light, not in darkness. He says we are cleansed from all sin and unrighteousness (1:7, 9). How is it, then, that we are liars if we say we have no sin? How is it, that if we say we have not sinned, it is as though we make God a liar? (1:8, 10). How do those two things go together, that we walk in light and are cleansed from unrighteousness, yet we still have sin in us? How do we reconcile these two statements? Will the effort open our hearts to greater understanding?

Similarly, there is some apparent conflict in what the Gospel says about the disciples. They are afraid and are hiding from the Jews. When he blesses them with peace, that implies there was some *lack* of peace among them. He wishes peace upon them because they had previously argued and jostled for positions of favor in the kingdom. He knows them well. He needs them to *actually* be peaceful and to harmonize among themselves. Are they conflict-oriented and full of fear, or are they ready to embody Jesus’ peace? Which is it?

We have to dive a little deeper into each passage to sort out what is going on. We also need to notice nuances, and make a distinction between dominant features and secondary features. Let’s look at the gospel story first. The apostles did, indeed, have a history of competing for Jesus’ favor, arguing “about who was the greatest” (Mark 9:34). Some of their disunity and melodrama continued in recent days. Peter had denied Jesus when confronted by a servant girl. Thomas, who was not with the other apostles at the time when Jesus first appeared to them, remained skeptical about the Resurrection. And all of them are said to be afraid and hiding from the Jews, which really means the Jewish *leaders*. So anxiety and fear seem to be dominant features for them in recent days in Jerusalem.

The peace that Jesus offers to them will need to conquer and replace their anxiety and fear. Peace comes with faith. Anxiety and conflict come with fear. Are they ready to be open-minded and open-hearted, to receive what Jesus offers? Jesus has been trying to teach them to embrace the spiritual values and take on spiritual power, and now he has to continue this effort with them as though they had learned nothing. Doesn’t it happen to us, too, that distress and strong emotion make it hard to think clearly?

Jesus lets them know that he will give them the Holy Spirit and they will have the power to declare whether people’s sins are forgiven or retained. This is probably referring to church discipline. The apostles will have a right to police their ranks, to rule if they consider someone’s repentance to be insincere.

The final decision will be God’s, to decide whether those sins really are forgiven. But the apostles are given the power to decide who has good standing in the community. It is a powerful responsibility they are given. We see this process mentioned in Jesus’ three-step rule in Matthew 18, where a person who refuses to admit his sin after being approached three times, may be banished from the fellowship (18:17). Heaven will approve and allow the social decision that the church leaders have made. It still will be God who really knows whether someone has sincerely asked for forgiveness, and can therefore be deemed forgiven. Jesus gives the apostles authority *within* the church.

The gospel also says there are many other things Jesus did which are not contained in the book. But the author has given us enough to persuade us that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. We have enough to go on. The apostles, after meeting the risen Jesus, had enough to rally their faith and then, after they received the Spirit on Pentecost, they gained new courage and went forth preaching with power and effectiveness. They were more confident then of their place in the family of God.

Now, let’s return to First John and see if we can resolve the apparent conflict between believers walking in light, cleansed of unrighteousness, and yet having sin in them. I think it means the Spirit gives them the power to have light and goodness become the *dominant* feature, but they still have sin in them as a secondary feature, lingering from the old life. So, even if we have entered into fellowship with Jesus, we are not perfect. We have to admit that we have sin in us. But Jesus forgives us and sets us on the right path. We, too, will have moments when we stumble on our journey. We need to be kind to ourselves and give each other time to grow and learn.

Gospel-faith and Spirit-living do indeed mean taking on a new dominant characteristic in one’s life. Light and truth become dominant, but sin still remains as a vestige of our past, and we cannot claim to be utterly without sin. John, in this passage, seems to be safeguarding against religious egotism, an all-too-common feature among some religious people.

A writer named Kristi Nelson writes about living gratefully and being present in the world. “It is a sacred act to pause,” she says. “It has become a radical act to stop, or even to slow down. Becoming more present to the moment is an intervention in automation. It wakes us up and keeps us from . . . sleepwalking through life. It introduces the opportunity for consideration and contemplation, and the possibility of recalibration. One of the reasons we might avoid pausing to be more present is that it opens us to vulnerability and everything that comes with it — messy and magical, tumultuous and tender, serious and sacred.” ([Stop: Cultivate Presence - Grateful.org](https://grateful.org/resource/stop-cultivate-presence/)) Such vulnerability is the opposite of egotism, allowing us to have more room in our lives for God’s grace.

So I encourage you to hold onto both the high idealism of walking in light, “cleansed from all unrighteousness,” and also to the practical knowledge that you are still a creature with some sin in your makeup. Idealism and realism can go together well.

Go forth and let your hearts be ready for new spiritual growth and changes. Jesus is with you every step of the way.