

Where Hands and Hearts Touch Heaven

1 John 1:1-4; John 21:15-19

Everything we've read from the word of God today was written by a man who imagined himself Jesus' closest friend. John never uses his own name in his own gospel. He only ever called himself "*the disciples Jesus loved*". Which means that, for John, being a Christian, believing in Christ was an intensely personal business. He was an old man by the time he wrote the words in our Call to Worship today. And yet he writes about Jesus as if he had seen him only the day before yesterday.

"What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our own hands have handled...the Word of life...was made manifest and we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life...who was with the Father and made manifest to us..."

John's not talking about an abstract God or a theoretical religion, he's writing about a man whose shoulders he embraced, whose sweat he smelled, whose voice still echoed in his minds decades after the fact. John knew and loved Jesus and learned from Jesus how to love the rest of the hot, smelly, noisy disciples who spend their lives building the first floor of God's kingdom on earth.

It was the farthest cry from the neat, tidy, conflict free, religion that most Christians want to live today. These men and the women in their entourage were too close for the empty shallow happy talk that modern Christians imagine true religion should entail. Because real love is more than making the people around us feel warm and cozy and satisfied with life the way it is. Real love involves sharing tears and sweat, working through problem and heartbreaks that are real and hard, staying with people when it would be easier and more comfortable to just let them go unloved and un-dealt with.

That's how Jesus loved John and the other disciples, hand to hand, eye to eye, heart to heart. Think of Jesus pulling Peter aside after breakfast on the beach and making Peter remember how many times he had denied Christ on a night when Peter was only trying to be brave. It was a hard but necessary talk, because unless Jesus and Peter both faced Peter's limitations, Peter would never get on the bike again, never dared to lead and teach the way he was going to have to lead and teach.

Jesus was saying to Peter in so many words, "I know you have failed and I know you will fail. But you're still the shepherd I called you to be and you'll have to lead and teach and feed and

care for my people, even at the risk of failure.” Because this table was set for people who commit sins and make mistakes and still believe that God will work with them to do better and be better as time goes on.

I had to laugh because, once Peter’s failure was faced and forgiven, he immediately turned and focused on John, the Favorite. “*What about him?*” Peter asked, “Why does he always come up smelling like roses?” I have to tell you, this is family talk! Even among the Twelve, they wondered who was loved more, who was worth more. “Forget about it!” Jesus said to Peter in so many words, “If John lives forever, it’s no business of yours! You follow me!” Jesus said to Peter.

Because this is the table where everybody stands on equal ground. Think we’ve got our ducks in a row? This table tells us that Jesus died for the mess we’ve made. Think we’ve done so bad that no one can turn us around. This table is the place where God doesn’t count our messes against us. Two questions to ask at this table: First, do we believe that God will love us through the messes we’ve made. Jesus said God will. And, second, do we want that? Understand! Not everybody wants to be loved by God, because being loved by Jesus sometimes involves a hard word after breakfast.