

July 22, 2018

If We Walk in the Light . . .

Annette Hill Briggs

I John 1:5-2:2

⁵This 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; ⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 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. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

***2** My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*

Years ago my friend Cathy needed help with her knitting. So she took herself to her favorite yarn shop where the master knitter there watched her knit for a few minutes, then said, "Good Lord, child, who taught you to knit?" To which Cathy replied, "My friend, Annette. She's left-handed like me." And Margie, the professional, said, "Well, I've never seen anything like it. And I suggest the two of you do the rest of us a favor, and never, ever teach anyone else to knit! Not ever!" Apparently, my knitting style has certain identifiable trademarks that the knitting community prefer NOT be passed down.

Whether or not 1 John was written by the actual hand of John the Apostle is still debated. But the fact that whoever wrote it learned the faith from him is not. It has John's theological, his spiritual, and even his literary DNA all over it. Beginning with, but hardly confined to, the twice-stated premise: God is light. On the very first page of the Bible, Genesis 1, we read that before anything else was, God was. Nothing was, except God. Then, at some time before time existed, God stirred the Nothing, and then

there was light. And now that light was, Darkness also was. By virtue of the light, there was dark.

Nothing. Then light. And, naturally, dark. John cannot leave this image-story-language about God as light alone, any more than he can leave alone the image-story-language of God in Christ as The Word. Both are there in the opening of his gospel – and here, in the opening of 1st John.

In the larger story of the epistle, John is calling out this baby church for believing it possible to be faithful to Christ without imitating Christ in their daily lives. This imitation I described through the Ten Commandments series as the habits of fidelity, holiness, and justice. This baby church, it seems, had found a way to worship Jesus minus the notions of Jesus as brother, friend or teacher, sacrifice or savior. For all those ways of Jesus – brother, friend or teacher, sacrifice and savior – require incarnation. Incorporating the ways of the incarnate Christ into our faith inevitably changes our conduct, our everyday life, what we do with the time and the stuff within our reach. This baby church, it seems, had found a *Christology of comfort* both spiritually and morally – a way of thinking about and talking about Jesus for their lives and their life together that eliminated those demands, the demands of a walking, talking, teaching, dying Jesus, but retained the spiritual comfort of a divine Christ.

Five hundred years ago the Church had Thomas á Kempis; eighty years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer; today, Father Richard Rohr – pastors teaching us to pray. By virtue of books we have them all. Writing to correct and encourage the liberal church for their (our) neglect of the omniscient Christ, (he is particularly talking about our neglect of contemplative prayer), Father Richard Rohr reminds us that when the divinity and humanity of Jesus are not held solidly together, if one is let slip away from our practice of this faith, we inevitably end up with half the gospel, having chosen to know just half the truth. In which case, we can never be more than half-faithful. For we only have one Jesus, only one Christ who came and lived and died and rose, who ascended and is present with us now. There are no more two Jesuses than there are two suns in our solar system.

In Seoul, Korea, it's 12 AM by the clock and tomorrow by the calendar; but it is still the same moment in time. We could call my best friend and he would answer – not thirteen hours from now, but *now*. It is both light and dark right now; because the light is over here, it's dark there. But that's changing as I talk about it. Because there is only one

sun, and it is moving as we speak. The light is ever changing, but never, ever gone. The darkness is merely one phase of the light. It is ALL light.

⁷ *If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and Jesus cleanses us from all sin.* Verse 7 is important in two ways I want to talk about: sin first and fellowship second.

We think we know lots about sin. We know to hate sin and love the sinner. But we are terrible at that, so we ending up hating ourselves. Hating ourselves for being imperfect and hating other people for being imperfect, because they remind us that we are also imperfect, which we hate even more – which leaves us in a world full of hate and in bodies full of sin. Each and every one of us. We know it. What we don't always get told often enough is that the sins we personally commit are only a fraction of all the sin in us. That is, we carry around a whole lot more sin than what we ourselves can take credit for.

Preachers love to talk about how Jesus bore our sins upon his body, how he took on the sins of the world. Friends, not just Jesus, but lots of people know all about that too – all about bearing the sins of others on their bodies, in their bodies. Little kids in Syria know about that. Black people in America know about that. Native American people know about that. Gay and lesbian and transgender and queer people – they know about that. Kids and women who are beaten by fathers and husbands and boyfriends – they know about that. Victims of sexual assault and harassment and crime and war and environmental abuse – they know about that. Lots of people bear the damage of the sins of other people – damage to their bodies, damage wired into their brains, into their nervous systems, into their culture.

And if they've heard that sin talked about at church at all, what they've heard is that they need to forgive. Which – most of the time, friends – is way too little way too late to count as mercy. Like offering a band-aid for a gunshot wound. Now it could be I just don't have enough ministry experience yet, but not very many people have come to see me wanting to talk over their own really big sins – folks wanting to talk about the really destructive, violent, mean kinds of sin; the damage they have inflicted, the pain they've caused, their desire to make it right. In thirty years of ministry, fewer than five. But I've sat with dozens and dozens and dozens of their victims. Relatives and neighbors and strangers who took the brunt of those sins; and generally, they don't realize the

Bible is talking to them in 1 John 1:7, about the pain of abuse and trauma and oppression and evil. That's all sin, isn't it?

Why wouldn't John mean *that* sin to be included here? If it hurts us and burdens us and makes us feel like we are living in some kind of darkness – some kind of evil – then it is the sin we carry, regardless of its origin. The people who come see me to talk about the sin done to them are as embarrassed and ashamed of the sins AGAINST them as the sins they've committed, if not more. They know all about wanting to hide. Hide that pain, hide that shame, hide that sin – even if nobody ever called it sin before, never held it up to the light of the Bible like this before. They know all about hoping against hope – to keep it in the darkness, if you will. But John brings a good word to us here, friends. Knowing Jesus means knowing what he said and what he did about how hurtful and destructive this everyday life can be to the human heart, to our very lives. He has cleansed us of ALL sin. No need to keep that junk in some hidey-hole, secret-shame closet of your mind and memory any more. No need to keep wondering, after you've confessed every bad thing you ever did, why you still feel so guilty all the time.

Sin stains everything it touches, and the Christ in us is the only thing that will clean it up for good. He said he would do this for us. Then he did. He broke down that terrible, terrible wall between life and grace, between punishment and freedom – that wall called death. And we are free. We are free to live free of the sin that would tell us we are broken beyond repair, that life cannot be better than it is now. You say you believe him. So don't go calling Jesus a liar by holding on to some ticking bomb inside you that he's already defused. And don't go calling him a liar by hiding in some other version of Jesus where everything is sunshine and rainbows and faith becomes a game.

This idea of light and darkness as all one thing is hard for our western brains to take in. We automatically think either/or, when the truth is both/and. God is light. Darkness is part of the light. A funny thing about chickens: either they can't see in the dark, or they are so terrified of the dark, they choose not to. If I forget to put them in their coop before dark, they hide. They hide in the dumbest places, like on a log six inches off the ground. A fox can get them six inches off the ground. I find them with a flashlight and carry them to their coop.

I don't know if we can't see or if we are so afraid we choose not to, when we are lost inside the darkness inside ourselves. But what I do know is that it's all light to the eyes of God. We are equally as safe in God whether our own eyes are closed or open. The

darkness and the light are only different to us. Not to God. But the difference is profound. We live differently in the dark – fearfully and, most of all, alone.

God knows no less about what goes on in the dark than in the light. God knows us inside out, all the way in. Our memories and history; everything we ever did; everything that ever happened to us; everything we ever saw, and how we think and feel about it now. Memories imprinted on our very selves that we'd give anything to have *not there*; that we'll protect until we die, rather than that other people ever see it. God has seen it. God saw it happen. God sees it now. We aren't alone in those memories. God is with us – which, truth be told, can still feel pretty lonely sometimes. Amen?

Remember the little kid who wanted to sleep with her mom? Her mom said, "Sweetie, God is with you here right now." The kid said, "Yeah, but I need a God with a face."

God with a face – that's fellowship. *If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and Jesus cleanses us from all sin. Koinonia* is the Greek word. It means together; life with others; family; fellowship. And this is its first appearance in the Bible. *But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.* We'll never find each other so long as we are each lost in the fear of our respective darknesses.

To walk by faith in ALL of what we know of Jesus – as teacher, friend, brother, sacrifice and savior – is to walk in the full light, to choose to live by what Jesus said is true and real. The kind of darkness that lives inside us is so good at making us feel so all alone, isn't it? Not in Christ. Not unless you're saying Jesus is a liar, John says. Which seems like a not very nice thing to say about Jesus. But there it is, on page 1,057 of the Bible. If we live in Christ – *Walk by the light as he himself is the light* – nothing happens in the darkness that he cannot see. Not even the darkness inside us. And he would not have us remain alone, cut off from those who would comfort us, nor from those who need our care. But that is another sermon for another day.

Would you pray with me?