

Staying in Love with God

1 John 1:1-4, John 1:14-16

First United Methodist Church, Baraboo

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Meet “the elder.” That’s what scholars call the writer of the Letters of John. These are three short books at the end of the New Testament; not to be confused with not the gospel of John. Though the two are connected. The people the elder was writing to were very familiar with John’s gospel. The gospel of John and the letters of John were written to the same folks; the letters were written after the gospel.

As we get to know “The elder” this month during a sermon series on the letters of John, it helps to think of a runner in a relay race. Imagine the elder with a baton in his hand. He’s passing on to his community (and to us) something precious; he’s passing on what he’s heard about Jesus: “the word of life.” “We 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 – “.... (1 John 1:1-2) He’s passing on this: Jesus was not just a spiritual being but a real human person. Jesus is God incarnate; who lived and died at a particular time and place. In order to know this Jesus, the elder says he wants us to have something called “koininia.” fellowship so that we can know this Jesus.

“koininia” is Greek for fellowship. Listen again to 1 John 1:3: “³we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have **fellowship** {koininia} with us; and truly our **fellowship** {koininia} is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” The elder is saying here the reason the good news of Jesus is preached, is so there will be koininia – sharing in the community of faith. Let’s dig into this a little more.

It says in our bulletin that we’re going to have some “koininia”/fellowship today, when worship is done. While cookies and coffee is a great place for koininia to begin, it goes far beyond that. “The elder” is saying that the koininia we have with each other in the church is the same ‘koininia’ that the God the Father has with God the Son. There was a koininia between the father and the son – an intimacy-- a complete sharing. This is obvious when you read the gospel of John; again and again this intimacy between the Father and Jesus the son come up. But God the father is not your typical Roman father who was at the head of a patriarchal family. In the ancient Roman world, the father had complete control over the family: wife, kids, slaves, etc. And to be a good Father meant you were in control of yourself too. Your body was intact, your reason was in control of your emotions. But God the Father spoken of

here isn't that kind of a father. This Father chose to become vulnerable. This father shared his son with the world, knowing full well that all the things human beings can do to each other. But God did it anyway. This father shared everything with this Son and shared this son with the world. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' (John 3:16) And the sharing, the intimacy the Father and son had is something we can have too. That's why I'm preaching about this, the elder says: so you can have koininia: "so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ." 1 John 1:3

All this sounds very abstract but actually it has everything to do with how we live our lives together as United Methodists. You remember the three simple rules: Do no harm; do all the good you can; stay in love with God? John Wesley said there were specific things we need to do to 'stay in love with God' – to keep our love for God strong and healthy. These things include prayer, reading the Bible, helping the poor, taking Communion, fasting and having Koininia/fellowship. John Wesley loved the first letter of John. He loved what "the elder" says here about how we come to know and love God in community; this place where we come to know others and be known.

If you want to remember just one thing from this sermon remember what it says on the front of the bulletin. There's a quote from 1 John 4:12. This verse sums up everything 1 John is saying; we'll come back to that verse in two weeks. Maybe you could even read it with me now: "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." John Wesley was passionate about what he called Christian perfection, which is what this verse is about. Perfect not in the sense of flawless; perfect not in the sense of never making a mistake. Perfect in the sense of complete (in Greek *telios*). That's the Greek word here: *telios*. Remember the image of "the elder" with a baton, running a relay race? The goal of that race – the end towards which religious people strive all our lives – our *telios* is love. When our love has reached it's most complete form, then everything we do will be motivated by love. What "the elder" and John Wesley teach is this: how we treat each other matters. Because the way we love, and share with each other, is how we share in the very life of God. We can't know God apart from the love we share in the community.

So, here's what this love looks like. My first story is about Aspiration United Methodist in St. Petersburg, Russia. According to Eduard Keghay, bishop of the Eurasia Central conference of the UMC, the average salary of people in Russia is \$300/month. Around noon every Sunday at Aspiration church, the soup kitchen opens. All sorts of people from the neighborhood come: elderly, working people, people out of work, recovering addicts. About twenty five on average. Given the average income, you can see why a free meal is appealing to people who live in St. Petersburg. But the reason people keep coming back goes beyond the food or the

free clothing they get. It's about the "koininia" – the way people treat each other. Everyone at Aspiration UMC are treated as children of God. People don't just hand them a bowl of soup. The church is not a social service agency, where some people receive and others give. Here, people sit together and talk. If you are new, someone listens to your stories. People pray for and with each other. In short what keeps people coming back is the Koininia. For in their sharing of food, conversation, friendship and prayer, they are participating in very the life of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

You can tell this is not a rich church in terms of money. That doesn't mean it's not a vital, healthy church. You can't buy "Koininia." Koininia is not for sale. The church is not a club, pay your dues and then you get "koininia" in return. "Koininia" is not that chummy feeling when you're with a bunch of people who all thing like you do. The church is neither a club where you pay dues nor a political party where everything thinks the same. Koininia is not something we do. Koininia is not about us. It's about God, and how God chooses to be made known to us. Koininia is participating in the life of God revealed in Jesus. It's something God does in and through us.

Koininia is not a performance either. It's not like going to a concert, a performance or a theatrical show, where you spend money and get a certain experience. I'm not performing this morning – neither is Bruce or Sandy. We are doing something different. We're sharing, sharing our worship leadership gifts. Right now, we're doing "koininia." That includes everyone, for through your presence you are sharing yourself with others. You are sharing yourself through your singing voice, your handshake/hug, conversations you have with others today. You can't fake "Koininia." It happens when people are really vulnerable to each other; when we share from the heart. Which brings me to my second story about what "koininia" looks like. Koininia happens every Wednesday night from September through May here in fellowship hall. For those of you who have never been to SPIRIT night here's what to expect when you come:

A bunch of people who don't all know each other well; of differing backgrounds, ages, walks of life come together and share a meal. There's conversation around the tables. Food is shared. Stories are told. You can make a donation for the cost of the meal if you want, but if you can't make a donation, no worries. Someone else has you covered. Some who eat then get up and clean up. Later after dinner there's time for children to make friends, and for kids to enjoy playing music together which they will later share in worship; and through it all people are known, there's a prayer, we are called by name and someone listens to our stories. We don't have to be anything other than who we are. There's "koininia."

So, here's the take away in all this. It matters how we treat each other because through our fellowship we participate in the very life of God; and make it possible for other people to do the same. But Koininia is not all warm "fuzzies." It requires something of us. It asks of us vulnerability. That is not easy. It's not easy at Aspiration Church in St. Petersburg to keep the soup kitchen going every week. It's not always easy to find cooks or people to clean up at SPIRIT night.

Koininia isn't always easy because it means getting along with people who are different. We have diversity today – don't all think exactly alike. We don't have to think exactly like to love alike. And in this we are no different from the early church.

The community to whom "the elder" was writing in the letter of John was experiencing diversity. Some people didn't believe the incarnation. They thought Jesus was a spiritual being, but not a real human being. These theological differences meant some said "I can't be in this church any more" and they left. But the believers still had to deal with these former church members in town, in the market place, or at the community well. It still mattered how they treated each other.

Koininia isn't always easy. So, why bother with "koininia"? Why not just go to a concert, a movie, a park on Sunday morning? Why be part of a worshipping community anyway? Because Koininia is how we participate in/share in the very life of God. Part of sharing in the life of God revealed in Jesus Christ involves embracing suffering, embracing the cross. Being vulnerable. In the same way, God the father made himself vulnerable to the hurt the world would do to his Son. Why did God choose to become vulnerable in this way? Because that's what love required. It goes back to 1 John 4:12 "no one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is perfected in us."

Thanks be to God for koininia, that allows us to know the love of the Father and of his son Jesus Christ. I'm so glad I'm here today and I'm glad you are too, so that together we can share in the very life of God. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.