

Get Real: True Confessions
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
July 1, 2018

1 John 1:1-2.2

Here's the thing... I really want to apologize for not being able to complete last week's sermon.

I underestimated the emotions that would course through my body four hours before sending my son to boot camp at Fort Jackson.

You see, I had written last week's sermon with many other people I care about in my mind: The ones with the daughter recovering from childbirth. The one fighting for her life in the ICU. The one who is in remission now and so, so thankful. The ones who graduated and anticipate new adventures. The one struggling with caring for an elderly parent. I wanted everyone to hear a word of hope.

So when I prepared words about how none of us are in the boat alone, I was thinking of other people. I wasn't thinking about myself, which is a coping mechanism that I am all too good at. And when I spoke those same words on Sunday morning, I realized that the Holy Spirit had something to say to me too. And it wrecked me.

My tears were really unprofessional, and I'm sorry if it made you feel uncomfortable. I regret scaring the kids who saw my ugly cry. I wonder if the visitor we had will return, since the preacher was so unhinged. The preaching moment is not supposed to be about me, and I'm grateful to Gerritt for finishing it.

As so many of you have commented to me this week, I am human. Besides the initial embarrassment, I've received a heaping dose of forgiveness and grace. You literally held me up when I could no longer stand. And I am thankful.

John's letter today reminds us that Jesus was human too. You see, some of the folks in the Johannine community were so enamored by John's gospel that they clung a little too tightly to Jesus' divinity. They forgot or denied his humanity. And without remembering his humanity, they were becoming

confused about how to live out his commandment to love. Was it only a spiritual thing, or did they carry a real responsibility to do something about it?

And so it was that the faith community struggled in these early days. Was Jesus just a human being like the rest of us, or was he really the Son of God? It's a struggle we've never really sorted out.

Most people today certainly agree that Jesus was human, yet many have trouble with the particularity of that claim. They may find it plausible to think of Jesus an expression of spiritual or ethical ideals, but have difficulty with the details of his life, crucifixion, and resurrection.

The opening line of the gospel spoke of "the Word" that created all things in "the beginning," and the epistle shifts the focus to the "Word of life" as the Christian message, which finds its "beginning" in the incarnation. The point of that message is to create fellowship or "koinonia" between God and people, and among people themselves.

God "speaks" an embodied word, which will repeatedly be identified as love. Authentic love is not an abstraction. It comes through speech, action, and presence - that is the manner of God's communication. That will characterize authentic faith and authentic community as well.

Our integrity involves consistency between words and actions. When we follow through with the commitments that we have made, it shows our integrity. When we say one thing and do another, it creates dissonance. We generally do not like to live with the contradiction, so we become experts in spin control. Initially we may wince at what we have said or done, but we go on to tell ourselves and others that it really was okay. It might have appeared to be a contradiction, but with a few tweaks to the storyline, we can show that we were right all along.

We have a propensity for kidding ourselves, but acknowledging our struggles is the first step toward moving beyond it.

Forgiveness is the mending of relationships, and it is based on the idea of release. It is the point at which one can be honest about the damage that has been done, while also saying that what has happened does not determine the future.

The height, breadth and depth of God's grace is beyond our imagination and comprehension. Maybe we have difficulty believing that it is boundless. So in our explanations of God's grace, we usually try to place limits on it. For example, we say that God is a merciful BUT there will come a time when God will judge and punish us.

God has promised us God's love, presence and forgiveness. When we approach God and confess our sins, there is no doubt that our sins will be forgiven. God's justice does not limit God's grace. As a just judge, God pardons us—freely wiping away our sins.

Martin Luther pointed out that followers of Jesus are at the same time sinners and saints. That writer of the letter of 1 John celebrates that we are always forgiven sinners/saints, who are free to move forward and share God's love and grace.

I am more and more convinced that the basics of what God expects of us can be laid out very simply. The life of faith is not difficult to understand; it's just impossible to accomplish--that is, apart from the work of the Spirit in our lives. At the very least, we need to be honest about who we are.

Some of us, myself included, have bought into a great myth. We think that the longer we live a life of faith, the holier we become--and the holier we feel. But that just isn't the case; at least, it hasn't been my experience. Spiritual growth does not mean that we feel somehow more holy. Just the opposite: it means that we know our limitations and missteps – and that God has forgiven us.

We are all a work in progress. And sometimes we will have faith, and sometimes we will struggle. As we step more and more into God's light, the cobwebs and dirt and grime in the dark corners of our soul get exposed.

And sometimes, just when we thought we had our house in order is when God shines a floodlight on a neglected spot. It's a spot that's been there for so long, we thought it was part of the floor pattern. God says its dirt, and we come to agree because you can't argue with a floodlight. And we can't get that spot out, only the Holy Spirit can. And when we admit that, perhaps that is the moment we are being honest with God, and with ourselves!

And so, may we live in the shadow of the light that is truth, and the hope it contains; and the love it opens to our neighbor, and grace that redeems.

May we live fully in the light: in the strength that brightens what the world might be: the compassion that seems rarer than ever, which is stronger than fear.

May we dare to be different, and live as a community that works to reduce the gaps and builds bridges, that brings strangers closer, that works against the fear of others, using language of compassion and generosity.

May we live as a community that seeks to appreciate others, growing our worldview rather than reducing it, and finding the kingdom in everyone who works to save the world for the sake of the other rather than just for ourselves.

May we defy narrow theology, and narrower politics, and live differently from the way the world is going. In such ways may we be God's people, wherever we find ourselves, bringing grace into every conversation with generosity, and in growing every relationship in the direction of love. So be it, Amen.