

“Walking in the Light”
Scripture: 1 John 2:7-11
William C. Pender

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Writing is an interesting communication process—we can have a written conversation. One of the recent innovations with cell phones is the capacity to send text messages. Instead of calling someone and telling them what you are thinking about, you type in a message and send it. Then the receiver opens the message, can read it, ponder it a bit, and then reply.

Now the dangers of this sort of communication are tremendous. A misspelled word can be confusing... the tone that was meant to be “funny” can come across as serious at the other end...and sometimes words get left out unintentionally. For example, in my own writing I have been known to drop out a strategic “not”—there’s a big difference between “I will be there” and “I will not be there.” In fact, there is a very famous or infamous printing of an English Bible that came to be known as the “Adultery Bible”—a strategic “not” was left out. Collectors consider this Bible extremely valuable. You probably have already guessed but in Exodus 20, it reads: “Thou shalt commit adultery.” Written communication can have its limitations! However, there is certain slowness to the written communication that is healthy. The slowness gives time for deliberation...for reading through the message several times...even holding on to a message for some time. In conversation, words fly by and are gone. A text message is there to be reviewed and considered.

Our Scripture today begins, “Beloved, I am writing you...” Now I think it would be fair to say that most scholars would suggest that the writer of 1 John was not a particularly good writer. It is not that the writer used poor grammar; it is not that the writer did not have anything important to say; but the entire work reads sort of like a rambling text message. For example, there is absolutely no agreement among Biblical scholars on the structure of this work. There is no clear development of a thesis. In fact, most scholars describe the work as a spiral—it circles around landing here and there, then comes back and lands here and there, and so on. To make matters worse, there are no biographical references to the writer—we don’t know whether the writer is male or female, whether Greek or Jew, where the document was written, or to whom it was written. All we really have is the text.

So let’s listen to a text message, without knowing anything about the who, what, when, or where. Let’s just listen to the side of the conversation that we have. We will take it in two sections.

1 John 2:7-8:⁷ Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard.⁸ Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

“I am writing you about an old commandment that is also a new commandment.” How can something be both old and new? Let’s take old first. Old...because this is reference to what

Jesus said. Already for this writer, Jesus is a historical figure in the past. It is an old commandment because it is something that was given in the past.

To be “old” is multivalent—that is, “old” can have different meanings. Consider these: Old wine—valuable...Old bread—not so valuable. Information in an old 1960 encyclopedia—depends on if it’s an article about George Washington or about computers. To be old when you are eight years old means to be 30 years old. And to this 50-year old, 30 is oh so young. Old...it is multivalent.

The writer points to the old commandment. Clearly, he means old in the most valued way. In a day where things are changing at such a rapid pace, there is something good in having that which is old, tested, true, dependable, and reliable. For this writer the old commandment refers to Jesus in the upper room with his disciples. Jesus knows he is about to die and so gives away the good stuff. That’s what people do with a will—they give away their good stuff. Here is Jesus’ will. He said, “I give you”—this is a gift. “I give you a new commandment that you love one another.” This is Jesus’ gift to his disciples and to us. It was new then but now it is a precious heirloom, a beloved bequest, a treasure. Old but as good as new, so the writer immediately shifts to the “new”—there is something new here. What’s new about “love one another?” If you have been around the church much at all, you have heard that, haven’t you? How can this be new?

The newness is tied to this phrase: “because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.” Now this is a big leap in this text message. What makes the commandment new is the light that is shed on it. Let me give you an example of the newness that light brings. As many of you know there are several owls perched on the roof of our church buildings—real owls...real artificial ones! These owls were originally part of an experiment by Duke Power to keep birds and critters off sensitive equipment. The Property Committee obtained some of these owls over ten years ago and placed them on our buildings to encourage pigeons not to roost and leave the other “presents” that pigeons will do.

These model owls look so lifelike that to this day we will still have a visitor rush into the office, out of breath, and say, “Come outside and look at this—there is an owl on the building in broad daylight!” And our job in the office is not snicker! The church staff has to be careful not to embarrass someone for their excitement and enthusiasm. It is new, novel, and a real discovery that has been made. And the last thing we want to do is ridicule someone who just wanted to share something with us—even if it is that old owl that has been there for over 10 years!

What’s new about the commandment is that darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Our writer gives three cases of what this sort of light looks like:

I John 2:9-11: [Case One]⁹ Whoever says, “I am in the light,” while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. [Case Two]¹⁰ Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. [Case Three]¹¹ But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the

way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

We then have three cases of those who are set in this darkness and light—the light of newness. The first says, “I am in the light” but he really hates his brother and sister. This is the hypocrite that all of us know—often it is the person that we see each morning in the mirror as we brush our teeth.

Here’s the odd thing about hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is faint praise for virtue. Hypocrisy says, “I want to be seen as if I were virtuous, even if I am not.” If I didn’t care about virtue, I wouldn’t be a hypocrite. So, what good is a hypocrite? At least, one good thing we know is that hypocrisy points to what is really important. “Case One”—claiming to be in the light but not practicing what happens in the light: love of one another.

Then second case, the one who loves brothers and sister—they are living in the light. These are the people who are hooked into faithful living: what they say, they do. And what they do speaks volumes about what is most important. They walk in the light.

There is an old Jewish tale of a rabbi who sat with a small number of disciples around a camp fire late into the night. In midst of the meandering conversation, the rabbi asked his disciples: “How can we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?”

One disciple quickly answered: “You know the night is over and the day has begun when you can look at a distance and determine whether the animal you see is a small dog or a cat.”

“A good answer,” said the rabbi, “but it is not enough.”

After several minutes of discussion, a second disciple ventured a guess on behalf of the entire group. “You know the night is over and the day had begun when you can see the leaves on a tree well enough to know whether it is a fig tree or a palm tree.” But that still was not enough.

After more discussion, the disciples demanded that the rabbi answer the question. The rabbi looked intently into their faces and said, “When you look into the eyes of another person and see a brother or a sister, you will know that it is morning. If you cannot see a brother or a sister, you will know that it always will be night.”¹

What a treasure to be around those who walk in the light! I thank God for those who walk in the light—their actions and their words match. What they write on their pledge cards, what they say in the hallway, what they do in their homes and workplace—it is all consistent with “love one another.”

It is like the children’s sermon in a church with beautiful stained glass windows depicting various Biblical scenes and moments in church history. The minister asked what a saint was. A

¹ There are many versions of this story. See, for example, William R. White, *Stories for the Journey*, Augsburg, 1988, pages 97-98.

child answered, pointing at the windows: “A saint is one who lets light come through them.”
Letting the light through!

So, we have the hypocrite—the want-to-be saint. We have the saint. And then we have “Case Three”—the one with self-inflicted blindness. Here is the one who makes no apology...no attempt at hypocrisy...no toning it down. And before we say, “Well, at least they are being honest,” consider what this writer says: They are “in the darkness, walk in the darkness, and do not know the way to go.” Here is what hate does to us: it blinds us; it is self-inflicted blindness.

In the Pastor’s Bible Study this week, a person remembered how the word “hate” was treated as a four-letter word in her upbringing. Even to speak of hate was to give it some power in our lives. Hate blinds us. The hypocrite (Case One) may yet come into the light—the hypocrite has enough sight to see where virtue is. Here in Case Three, coming into the light is of no avail because we no longer have eyes when we hate. All the light in the world will not restore vision to someone who does not have eyes.

Consider the plot line of Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun* about a black family in Chicago in the mid-fifties. Walter Jr. is a pivotal character. He gambles the family’s inheritance from his father’s life insurance policy on the opening of a liquor store. But one of the partners turns out to be hustler and makes off with the entire inheritance. Walter had promised his mother to set aside half of the money for his sister’s education—she was going to medical school. But Walter had gambled that money as well. His sister, learning that there will be no money to send her to medical school says in contempt of her brother, that there is nothing left to love in him.

Mama replies to her daughter:

There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing. Have you cried for that boy today? I don't mean for yourself and for the family 'cause we lost the money. I mean for him; what he's been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most; when they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning -- because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself 'cause the world done whipped him so. When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.²

There is always something left to love. After this tragedy of Walter Jr.’s doing, he thinks he can fix his mistake by selling out to a representative from a white neighborhood’s association. It turns out that before his mother had turned the inheritance over to him, she had bought a house in an all-white subdivision outside of town. And that neighborhood was willing to pay good money to keep Walter Jr. and his family from moving in. It is so simple—take the white man’s

² I clipped this quote years ago but now have lost the original source. I have seen the play several times. One source of this quote on the Web is <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/quotes/a/hansberry.htm>

money. In other words, take the money and admit you are not good enough or worthy enough to live in their neighborhood

But Walter Jr. finally says “No.” That’s his mama’s home, and his father had earned it. Walter Jr. cannot make up for the mistake he has made by further throwing away himself for the desire for money. And the motivation and transforming power for Walter Jr. was that Mama still loved him, still held out for him. She didn’t bail him, didn’t tell him everything was all right, she just loved him and held out hope for him. She bathed him in love...there’s always something left to love.

Walking in the light with an old commandment that is as new and fresh and possible as each new breath we draw...maybe we have been a hypocrite...but we may yet be those through whom light passes through. Love one another.