

Today we are going to begin a series on First, Second, and Third John. Now I have been told but I do not know if it is true but in one of our Presbyterian seminaries there is a bathroom with three toilets. On the door to the first toilet is written First John, on the door to the second is written 2nd John, and on the door of the third is written, you guessed it, 3rd John. Again, I was told this so I do not know if this is true. Such is the humor of Presbyterian seminary students.

1st, 2nd, and 3rd John are not to be confused with the gospel of John. The gospel of John is one of the four gospels along with Matthew, Mark, and Luke that tell us about the life of Jesus. First John is called a letter but it is not really a letter. It is more like a written sermon addressing an early Christian community having a conflict with one another.

As we read through 1st John we will discover that this first century congregation is having a difference of opinion on some issue and that some people have left the church. Although the author never identifies himself the style and wording leads us to believe it was either written by the writer of the gospel of John or someone from that same community. For that reason it is called First John.

This church community that is being addressed is having a really big church fight. We will see that the writer is so mad at the group that has left the church that he calls them antichrists, the only place in the Bible where that word is used. So recognizing that these are words written to a church community having a big conflict with one another, let us begin by reading the first chapter of 1st John.

Read I John 1:1-2:2

The word translated fellowship or community is the word Koinonia. You may have heard that word before. Koinonia means real community. Real community where people are there for one another. So since 1st John calls this church to living out koinonia, it is clear that they are not living out koinonia.

And what do we learn about how they are breaking apart their koinonia? The first thing we see in this passage we read is that some people are claiming that they do not sin. But the author of 1st John has some very strong words for them. Anyone who says they do not sin is a liar. All sin and fall short.

I have been reading the book *No Future Without Forgiveness* written by Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. In this book he describes his experience serving on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. When apartheid was ended and South Africa became a democratic country in the 1990s, its rulers had a very difficult decision to make. Would they set up a commission like the Nuremburg Trials were set up in Germany after World War II and try war criminals?

Or was there another option? South Africa decided to take a different route. South Africa passed a law that set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This commission would review political crimes for the past 30 years and have the ability to grant amnesty to anyone who fully confessed to what they had done.

I want to share with you one of the events that the commission studied over a 2 day period. During apartheid, black South Africans were divided into ethnically based states to keep them separated. They were “independent” states and they were ruled by local leaders. These rulers had no authority outside of their state and, of course, the national government was ruled only by whites.

In September 1992, what came to be known as the Bisho massacre happened. Bisho was in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. This was an independent homeland ruled by a man named Oupa Gqozo. At first this black South African ruler was friendly toward the African National Congress but then relationships soured. The African National Congress or ANC was the main opposition force for black South Africans.

The ANC decided to stage a march on Bisho to highlight its campaign for free political activity in all homelands including this area. In September of 1992, the ANC marched in Bisho and the local police fired on unarmed demonstrators. 30 people died.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission held two hearings on the Bisho massacre; the first one took place not far from the scene of the massacre. The hall was packed to the rafters with those who had either been injured in the incident or had lost loved ones, as well as those who had participated in the doomed march.

One of the first witnesses was the former head of the police. When he gave testimony he incensed the audience by what he said. He showed no remorse and said they did what they had to do. There was nothing that they did wrong. The crowd grew angry at what he said. The next witnesses were former police officers, one white and the others black. The white officer was their spokesperson.

The white officer said that it was true that they had given the orders for the soldiers to open fire. The tension became even thicker. The audience started to move toward open hostility. But then the officer turned toward the audience and made an extraordinary appeal. He said: We are sorry. The burden of the Bisho massacre will be on our shoulders for the rest of our lives. We cannot wish it away. It happened.

But please, I ask specifically for the victims not to forget, I cannot ask this, but to forgive us, to get the soldiers back in the community, to accept them fully, to try to understand also the pressure they were under then. This is all I can do. I am sorry, this I can say, I am sorry.

And then Desmond Tutu says something happened that can only be described as a miracle. That crowd, which had been close to lynching them, did something quite unexpected. The crowd broke out into thunderous applause. The mood change was startling.

When a married couple is facing a problem in the relationship, it is very common for each partner to blame the other. Each partner says that the problem is there because of something that the other has done. But for that marital problem to be resolved, each partner must be willing to look at what they did to contribute to the problem. Marital problems are never one sided. There are always two sides to the story.

The advice that 1st John gives to this community having a conflict with one another is that everyone must admit that they have sinned. If one says they do not sin they are a liar says this author.

The author even says that to admit that you sin is to live in the light of Christ. John says to walk in the light of Christ is to have fellowship, community, koinonia with one another.

I want to share with you my own personal story of how I am learning that confession of sin is important for me. I see Dr. Guy Shealy for professional coaching and personal therapy. This week I was telling Guy that confronting my sins is like being a mountain and I am stripping away the layers of sin and dysfunction to get down to the core of who I am. I told Guy that it is so tiring to do this. One can build up a lot of layers in 46 years.

But I am also realizing that with each removed layer, I feel a sense of greater freedom and release of anxiety. As my anxiety is released then the beauty of my created self is able to be shared. Indeed my experience is showing me that confession of sin really is good for the soul.

If we say we do not sin then we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

May we all strive to walk in the light of Christ and admit that we are not perfect and that we make mistakes. When we do that, then the chance for real koinonia is a possibility. AMEN.

-Tutu, Desmond, No Truth Without Forgiveness (kindle, can't figure out how to site page yet)

-Given: April 15, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

Prayers of the People

God who redeems this world, we come to you as broken people. Like the community that the author of 1st John addressed, we have broken relationships as well. Give us the courage to admit that we are sinful and make mistakes. Work within all of us to build a real koinonia that models what you call our faith communities to be.

God of miracles, we are thankful for the people who find ways of forgiving one another. We are thankful for the model of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and how that group shows all of us that overcoming of atrocities is possible through acts of forgiveness.