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St. Francis Episcopal Church (Stamford, Connecticut)

Second Sunday in Easter (Year B)

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“We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

1 John 1:3-4

This morning we heard the opening chapter of the First Letter of John, which is really more like an extended sermon than a letter. We'll hear a passage from First John each Sunday for the next five weeks so that by the end of Easter, we'll have read almost the entire Epistle. The author's primary aim in First John is to remind his audience of the central claims and teachings of the Gospel and, in the process, shield them from misleading claims and falsehoods being spread by certain members of the community. Leaving no room for doubt as to the danger posed by these false prophets, he refers to them later in the letter as “antichrists.” While the exact identity of these “antichrists” isn't clear, their teachings have resonances with a heresy that came to be known as Docetism, which was a belief that Jesus was only divine and not human.

For us, the claim that Jesus was both human and divine has been enshrined as orthodoxy for many centuries and is not something we spend a lot of time debating. But the earliest Christian communities were still trying to figure out *exactly* who Jesus was, and the debates about his human and divine “natures” would continue well into the fifth century. For the author of First John, writing less than a hundred years after Jesus' death and resurrection, there was a great deal at stake in his conviction that Jesus was both God *and* an en-fleshed human reality. What was at stake was nothing less than an entire way of life, for in their denial of Jesus' humanity, the opposition group also denied the need to follow Jesus' moral and ethical teachings and to model their lives after his. And *this* is why the writer of First John has so much to say about acknowledging sinfulness. Hear these words again: “If we say that we have no sin, 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.”

You may be wondering what relevance an ancient heresy like Docetism has for us today, or why I’m focusing on *sinfulness* of all things on the Second Sunday of Easter! Easter is, after all, the season when we emphasize resurrection and redemption. It’s the season when we omit the Confession entirely from the liturgy! But just as there is no Easter without Good Friday, I suggest that we can’t experience the full joy of resurrection and Christ’s victory over sin without, at the same time, acknowledging our sinfulness. First John reminds us of our sinfulness but at the same time reminds us of the good news that in Jesus Christ we have an “advocate,” who is, as the author of the Epistle writes, “the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” Surely this is good news for any season.

To be sure, our relationship with sin in the church is complicated. Many of us have come from traditions or past experiences where the emphasis on sinfulness came at the expense of an emphasis on forgiveness, grace and redemption. Many of us, too, have had the language of sin wielded against us around things like sexuality and divorce, which is incredibly hurtful. For these reasons, it can be unhelpful to talk in vague generalities about sin, so let me share a specific experience from my own life...

By this time, most of you have heard me talk about taking an extended leave from seminary to go live in Minnesota about a year-and-a-half ago, right as I was starting my senior year. What I have not told you was that I took this leave from seminary and moved to Minnesota to receive treatment for addiction. There are lots of reasons why I haven’t shared this information until now – it’s not the kind of thing that’s easy to work into conversation at coffee hour. And to be clear, I don’t see addiction as a sin or a moral failing. I have come

to understand it as an illness. For me, the question of sin arises when I allow feelings of shame about my addiction to isolate me or close me off from my relationship with God and the world, or when shame interferes with my ability to discern and do God's will, which in turn prevents me from being useful to others. Thanks to the treatment I received, my ongoing recovery program and all the positive support I have in my life, I am, by the grace of God, sober and healthy today. As a community who has been so instrumental in forming me for ministry and supporting my ministerial aspirations, I don't want shame to come in the way of my sharing this experience with you, because it has indeed been a profound experience of God's transforming grace and I believe it's worth sharing.

I am reminded of a time when I had been in Minneapolis for only a few months and was still living in a sober halfway house. On this particular day I received an email from someone at St. Francis who had come across the text of a sermon I had given almost a year earlier. In a kind comment on my sermon, this person wrote, "As per your style, you included a piece of yourself" and wove that together with a biblical text to leave us "with a feeling of love and hope." Receiving that email at that particular moment was incredibly important to me. It served to remind me of all the ways that the St. Francis community had nurtured me and affirmed me in my ministry. In that reminder, and others like it, I was able, little by little, to let go of the shame I was clinging to – shame that was standing in the way of my healing – so that I could rebuild the foundation of my recovery and return to the work that God was calling me to.

And although I rejoice at having found recovery, I hold this joy in tension with the knowledge that in 2016, roughly 64,000 people in the United States died of a drug overdose – a number on par with the total American deaths from the Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq

wars combined.¹ Sadly, while overdose is now the leading cause of death in the US for people under 50,² only about 10 percent of people with a substance use disorder receive specialty treatment.³ And while addiction has been recognized as an illness by the American Medical Association since the late 1980s, the stigma surrounding the disease is still very real. At this very moment, people in positions of power in this country are working to bring back failed policies of the past to confront the current epidemic – policies which seek first to criminalize addiction through harsher punishment and stricter laws...policies which have an inordinate effect on people of color and those battling poverty...policies that siphon money away from treatment and prevention efforts to focus on criminalization. These approaches, I believe, are grave societal sins because they prize shame and stigma over healing and redemption. My own experience has shown me that freedom from shame and stigma is the very thing that gives way to healing and a return to wholeness. It was in the very act of being remembered by that parishioner and many others, and in the gift of being loved without judgment, that the wall shame had built slowly began to crumble so that I could begin to recover.

In the story from the Gospel of John today, the risen Christ invites Thomas to see and touch the “marks” in his hands and side and in so doing, to behold a miracle of transformation. The miracle is this: that the wounds Jesus suffered in the depths of his humanity were transformed into scars of grace in the glory of his divinity. In my experience

¹ “The First Count of Fentanyl Deaths in 2016: Up 540% in Three Years,” *The New York Times*, 2 Sept 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/09/02/upshot/fentanyl-drug-overdose-deaths.html>

² “Drug Deaths in America Are Rising Faster Than Ever,” *The New York Times*, 5 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/05/upshot/opioid-epidemic-drug-overdose-deaths-are-rising-faster-than-ever.html>

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office of the Surgeon General, “Facing Addiction in America: The Surgeon General’s Report on Alcohol, Drugs, and Health” (Executive Summary). Washington, DC: HHS, November 2016, [https://addiction.surgeongeneral.gov/executive-summary](https://addiction.surgeongeneral.gov/executive-summary#https://addiction.surgeongeneral.gov/executive-summary)

of encountering the risen Christ in my own recovery, my Good Friday wounds of anguish and suffering have been transformed into Easter scars of strength and hope. Like the writer of First John, I, too, think there is a lot at stake when we share the truth of the Gospel as it has been revealed to us. These scars are my testimony, my witness to the truth of the Gospel, and to the power of the risen Christ, the God who is light, in whom there is no darkness at all, who takes away the sins of the world. Thanks be to God, and to you, for giving me the courage to share that Gospel. Alleluia, Alleluia, Amen!

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