

Text: 1 John 2:7-11. Third Sunday after Epiphany. **January 26, 2014.**

Grace and peace are yours through Jesus, the Light of the world. Amen.

January stinks because it's dark. You wake up and it's dark. You drive to work in the dark. You drive home and it's dark. When it's dark you have no energy. You get depressed, irritated. Thousands of people suffer from a condition called Seasonal Affective Disorder, or appropriately, SAD for short, because of the darkness. The solution? Light! Seriously. Light is the cure for SAD. People with that condition buy special lights and sit under them just a few minutes a day. The light cures the condition! We have a worse condition than SAD. We have sin, a big, dark, ugly monster that not only causes depression, but even spiritual death. The solution, the only solution? The light! Jesus! Jesus brings the light. Jesus gives forgiveness. I can't make it physically light on your drive to work. But God gives us the real light, the spiritual light, Jesus. I think it's no coincidence that long ago the season of Epiphany was placed in January. Epiphany is the season of light in the Church year and while we need the light of Jesus all year round, we can certainly use some extra light in January. Walk in the light. Walk in the light.

The first step to walking in the light is to know where to find that light. The place to find that light is in God's Word, in the Bible. John begins this section with verses about new and old commands. In a sense these are the same command, the command to love your brothers and sisters. This is an old command because it is found in the Old Testament, over and over and over and over. But it's a new command, new in kind and of a different nature and novel because Jesus explained the full meaning of this command. Love your neighbor as yourself is not just a superficial and passing emotion. Love is an attitude, an action. Love penetrates your heart first and then changes your life. For example, some people in the Old Testament had defined the command to forgive (which I think everyone would agree is a loving thing to do) as forgive seven times and then you were done. Keep score of your forgiveness and that will be good enough for God. Do you think God keeps score of how often he forgives me? He is going to need a lot more than fingers and toes for that one. The point is that love doesn't keep score of forgiveness. Love does as much as possible, not as little as possible. And now, defining love, forgiveness in this way, that was new and novel.

Ok. So we've seen the new command (and really the old command is the same, just described in its fullest way). The new command is this: love your brother. Walk in the light. But there's all these words John uses again and again and again. And if you read more of John you will keep seeing this terms time and time and time and time over. Light. Darkness. Love. Hate. We really need to define these and not for a balderdash dictionary game contest, but we need to define them on a heart level so that not only our minds are in line with God's Word on these terms, but so our hearts line up with God's heart on these terms.

Let's start with the first and most prominent word: light. Light. What do you think of? Let's start with God. The first comma and quotation marks in the Bible, the entire Bible are, "let there be light." When God showed his glory in the Old Testament, he showed his glory with light. When God wanted to announce Jesus' birth, he didn't put it on facebook, he sent light into the sky and a special light, a star to guide wise men to Jesus. Light is connected with God. Light is something that's out in the open, something that's visible. When there is light you can see clearly. Only in the light of God's Word can we see clearly what pleases God. The "light" of our reason and popular opinion may not always do such a good job. What's interesting here is that the word for truth literally means unconcealed. See the connection with light? Putting the light on something, uncovers it, shows its true nature, shows what it really is. Now one final cool thing. When light meets darkness, which one wins? Light, right? If a room is dark and you turn on the light, it's not dark anymore. The darkness is passing away. The true light, Jesus, is already shining. I heard a great definition of light from one of our church members. He said, "I want to do those things I'd be happy to do in front of God instead of those things I'd need to ask his forgiveness for." Doing those things I'd be happy to do in front of God, that's walking in the light.

On the other hand, we have darkness. And that's everything the opposite from light. Darkness is cover up. Darkness conceals actions you wouldn't want other people to see. Bars are dark. Thieves wear black and commit their crimes at night. Darkness is sin. Darkness is the devil. Darkness is death. Obviously when it's dark, you can't see. It puzzled me to read the phrase walks around in the darkness. What good does that do? You won't get anywhere or achieve anything. Darkness is fear. Have you seen any of these TV shows that put people into a dark room? They might have a pile of soft pillows in front of them, yet they are screaming and freakin' out. They don't know what it is and that makes them afraid. That's darkness.

Now we get to two other words: love and hate. Wow! Will the light have to change our minds on these. The common definition of love, especially at it relates to other people tends to be, "Let people do what makes them happy." That sounds so good. And when you are walking in the light of God and God's Word, when you are living your life in line with God's Word, then what makes you

happy is what makes God happy and then that's a fine definition of love. Let people walk in God's Word. Let people live in the light. But what about when what makes me happy is not in line with God's Word? What about when I am walking in the darkness of sin and don't even realize it because the darkness has blinded my eyes? Then is it love to let someone stumble in the darkness? Then is it love to let someone wander away from God's Word? You see, love is about leading people to holiness first, happiness may or may not come second. The light of God's Word tells us, "Be holy, because I the Lord your God am holy." It's living in the darkness to think God said, "Be happy, because I the Lord your God am happy." Leading people to holiness is not always as easy as allowing them happiness. To lead to holiness, to love, I may have to correct. I may have to get someone to change course. I may have to be God's tool to turn someone around, bring them out of the darkness they enjoy and into the light that might hurt their blinded eyes at first, like the prisoner in solitary confinement who winces when the door is opened. But God has not called us to walk in happiness. God has called us to walk in holiness, to walk in love, to walk in the light.

On the other end of the spectrum from love we have hate. Hate isn't so much an emotion I feel toward people. Hatred is an attitude toward people. Are people irritants, like when you ask for help at a store and the employee rolls his eyes, sighs deeply and says, "Aisle eight," like I should have been born with that knowledge and how dare I interrupt your work? Hello, without customers you don't have any work to do. Are people merely competitors? Am I always trying to show someone up? They get engaged. I barely say congratulations, but I'm really thinking, "Now I can tell my cool engagement story." My friend is doing well at his job. I tolerate a few seconds of listening. Then I have to spend minutes telling him how much better I am. That might not sound like hatred at first glance, but examine those scenarios. Do I see myself putting myself ahead of others? That's really hate. Do you remember JOY, J O Y? Jesus first, Others second, Yourself last? Putting myself ahead of others robs me of joy. From no joy I go to irritated, competing, angry. Anger consumes me. Hate occupies my attitude. And every little bit more of hate, leaves less and less room for love.

Now do you see how defining these words is more than an academic exercise for a vocabulary quiz? Truth is God's Word. God's Word is truth. That's the message I have heard. Will I let marriage be defined by the truth of God's Word, the light, or will I let marriage be defined by popular opinion, that might be in the darkness? Am I going to walk in the light, doing those things I would be happy to do in front of God? Or is my TV, computer, phone, facebook, filled with words and pictures I would rather keep in the darkness, away from God, in sin? Do I let others wallow in their own notion of happiness? It's just having a good time. It's just blowing off steam. Or do I walk in the light and love my brothers and sisters enough to lead them to holiness, even when they want to stay in the dark? Have I committed the greatest act of hatred and let my brothers walk away from the light of God's Word, let my sisters live in the darkness of sin, allowed them to stay away from God's house and given them no warning, no Word, no light?

What a wretched person I am? What's the solution? Bring those sins into the light. Confess them. Don't try to minimize or hide your sins with more darkness. Break the darkness with light. Shine the light of God's Word on those sins and the light will melt them away. Confess your hate-sins to God and they are forgiven. Admit your lack of love sins to God and the perfect life of perfect love of Jesus is yours, free of charge. Put the light on your truth sins and the darkness is gone. Sin is gone. Death is gone. Jesus rose. Death is defeated. Darkness has lost to light. Darkness is passing away. Light shines. Light reigns. Light wins.

Light changes your heart. You are no longer a trap, a stumbling block that leads people to temptation. The light gives you strength to lead people away from sin. Once you walk in the light, you will be a beacon to others to walk in the light. When others see you can have holiness and happiness, they will want both as well. Put your phone, computer in the light and the darkness will disappear. Lead a brother or sister back to the light. You can look around and see who's not here. One email, one text, one phone call could be all it takes to lead them back to the light. Light and love and God go together. Walk in the light and you are walking with God. Walk in the light and you are walking in love. Walk in the light! Walk in the light! Amen.