

June 3, 2018
Testifying to the Spirit
1 John 1:1-4

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“Fellowship Enfleshed”

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— 3 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. 4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Over the next few weeks, we will be working our way through the first few chapters of 1 John. Written in the early second century, the text of 1 John reflects debates and disputes of the early Christian community. While lacking the external marks typical of a letter, 1 John is no abstract meditation or theological treatise. It is directed, as with most of the documents of the New Testament, to concrete living communities, to real people, whom the author refers to as “children” and as “beloved ones.” Scholars have suggested that 1 John resembles a sermon or homily, perhaps we could view it as a sermon in the form a letter. You will notice that 1 John is clearly connected to the tradition and communities associated with the Gospel of John. It shares a similar language and theology. Already in verse 1, we read: “We declare to you what was from the beginning...” One can see here a close resemblance to the opening words of the Gospel of John, what is often referred to the Prologue: “In the beginning was the Word.”

It appears as though the author seeks to present himself as an eyewitness of the Jesus of history, but most scholars believe that the document was written at such a late stage, making any historical connection highly improbable. Instead, we might conclude that the author is motivated to speak in this way for an important theological reason. The author is concerned to defend against the position of false teachers who represent a view of Jesus Christ as not really human, not really flesh and blood, but only seemingly so. The idea that Jesus, as divine, only *appeared* to be human or looked like a human, only *appeared* to suffer and die was prevalent in some early Christian communities. Such a view may seem strange to us, but it makes a lot of sense. If God is God and as such eternal and set apart from creaturely life, from flesh and blood, finitude, suffering, and death, then surely Jesus if he was indeed God could not have experienced the things of the flesh, particularly those dimensions of creaturely, human life that mark the great difference between God and creatures. But the author of 1 John wants his readers to know that just the opposite is the case!

What is critical for the author of 1 John is that the congregation understands that the life and work of Jesus Christ is no ahistorical and disembodied truth, nor is it primarily a “spiritual” or “religious” phenomena floating above our heads. What is important for the author is that Jesus was flesh and blood, a historical person, the man from Nazareth, who ate and drank, who had emotions and feelings, who had ups and downs and even experienced suffering and death. This is why the author emphasizes sense perception -- the author testifies and seeks others to join him in becoming witnesses to the person and work of an *embodied* Jesus, God came to us in the flesh; God was palpably present in such a way that one could hear and see and touch him. Christ is no mere idea, but flesh and blood. Christ is body. Christ is corporeal. Indeed, the faith of the community, the author of 1 John is at pains to tell us, has its basis not in some *idea* but in the one who walked along our scorched earth, in a particular time and place, who preached good news to particular poor people, who proclaimed freedom to particular people imprisoned and beaten down and pushed out onto the edges of the dominant social order, and who for these reasons he was hounded down by Pontius Pilate and the Sanhedrin and met a violent death by torture and crucifixion on Golgotha. Faith, then, is rooted then not in an *idea* but in a fleshliness of a body.

Why insist on this point? Does it not take away from *divinity* of Jesus? A friend of mine once told me a funny story about his sojourn at a conservative Christian college, Oral Roberts University, founded by the evangelist Oral Roberts in the mid 1960s. Now, listen, I can't testify to the veracity of his story, but here is what he said. The theology taught and practiced at Oral Roberts at this time, probably the late nineties, was so invested in a particular understanding of the *divinity* of Jesus, that is, his *godliness*, that Jesus had come to be seen as removed from anything human at all. In response to this popular theology, he told me, a group of rebellious young students, decided to stage something of a protest. This group of students created this huge banner and hung it from the balcony of one of the student dorms. Across the banner read the following two words in bold capital letters: **JESUS POOPED**. Apparently, the students involved in this demonstration were reprimanded and one was even expelled from the university outright. I have always found this story fascinating, not only for its obvious rebellious character, but because of the theology articulated in it, at least implicitly. Think about it. What these students were saying is that Jesus Christ *was a human being*; they were affirming what Christians have called the “Incarnation,” that Jesus was God made flesh. And what do human beings do? Stew, are you there? Owen, Luke, do you the know the answer? **They poop**. Or, as my mother would say: BM, but anyway. This is really important, right? *God did not become enfleshed among us* as an idea, nor did God become *enfleshed among us* as a kind of ideal human being, a kind of superhero figure who remained at a distance from our *poop*. No, God became a human being. And that means that Jesus, if he was indeed God in the flesh, must have pooped. Not only that, but *Jesus* identified unreservedly with us in this way, to the point of even identifying with the grossest things about us.

But this is, in a sense, still rather abstract, because God did not become enfleshed in just any human body, but concretely, in a particular body of flesh and blood, who lived a particular kind of life and who preached a particular kind of message, and who died a particular kind of death. The eternal life of God was made manifest in this One, as the author of 1 John puts it, and God is *revealed* in the flesh and blood of the man who did indeed poop and who did indeed come from that “shit-hole” town of Nazareth.

So, too, we are people of flesh and blood, people who live in the body, people who live in concrete communities with concrete histories that have marked us in the flesh, in particular kinds of ways. The author of 1 John would have us know that the Spirit creates a kind of fellowship with God and with the eternal life of God made manifest and revealed in this One. And as surely as God was present in the *body* and flesh and blood of Jesus, so too our fellowship with God and with one another occurs not somewhere above our heads in the abstract, but in the flesh, in the body, always in relation to one another. We are always bound to one another in our bodies. And though our enfleshed lives are yet to be made complete by the eternal life that comes from God, room has been made here and now for joy in the flesh, a joy made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, who calls us to participate, to share in the lives of one another.

And yet, although we live in the confidence of the joy that comes with the Spirit of Jesus, we know perhaps all too well the contradictions of life in the Spirit. We know the realities of suffering, some of us have experienced this more intimately than others, we know the realities of human brokenness and sin and violence and oppression, and we know that these things never happen abstractly either, for we experience them in our bodies, in our flesh. We do not experience them alone, even if our experiences of suffering creates a profound sense of isolation. We are not islands unto ourselves; we are always bodies in relation to others. When one person suffers, all of us suffer. When person is full of joy, we also feel that joy and we may even become joyful with them! When one person is isolated, we feel that isolation in our bodies. When one person is assaulted, we feel it. This is a gift of the Spirit that creates in us a strong bond to others, what the author of 1 John calls “fellowship” (*koinonia*), even with those we don’t know.

The Caravan

Last Sunday I mentioned that Marcia and I decided to become sponsors for two families seeking asylum in the US who are fleeing violence in their home country of Honduras. Two sisters, Nuria and Bessy, along with their five children joined a Caravan of over 600 people in early April that was headed to the border. We have been searching for them in anyway that we could. The other night Marcia found Nuria on Facebook! She and her children are beautiful. Seeing their faces we can barely wait for them to come stay with us. You may recall that the President of the US called for 4,000 members of the National Guard to immediately detain this family and others from the

Caravan at US-Mexican border if they dared to cross. As is his MO, the President took to Twitter, suggesting that the group will pour into the US unchecked, bringing in drugs and crime. But that is, of course, completely wrong. The real story is that these caravans have been organized since 2008 to help migrants from Central America find refuge in the US or Mexico. Eighty percent of the people who joined this year came from Honduras. They are not coming to the US to traffic drugs, they are not criminals, they are seeking a place of refuge from unrelenting violence, rampant inequality, and political corruption in their home country.

Last year's presidential election in Honduras has made the situation even worse. As one Honduran human rights lawyer put it, "Honduras was on fire and the election crisis threw gasoline on it. It unmasked the reality of the country -- our institutions are broken and the president, because of the elections, has no legitimacy." The newly elected President Juan Orlando Hernandez, a right-wing ally of the United States, narrowly beat out Salvador Nasralla, a leader of a left-wing coalition who had broad popular support. Amid reports of election fraud, thousands of Hondurans took to the streets in protest, which was met by severe repression by the Hernandez government. At least 22 civilians were killed by security forces after the election and the government has intensified their crackdown on dissent, intimidating dissenters in their homes and detaining hundreds of protesters arbitrarily. The turmoil also created an opening for gang violence. Since the 1990s large sections of Honduras have been controlled by gangs, making Honduras one of the deadliest places in the world. In northern Honduras many citizens were caught in between the violence of the gangs and the violence of a repressive government. Kids are threatened and beaten by police and youth are disappearing after being picked up by the police. The Hernandez government has been accused of numerous human rights violations and corruption. 60 percent of Hondurans are unemployed and over a quarter of youth ages 15-24 were not in schools or at jobs. The stories of the Hondurans in this year's refugee caravan -- families traveling with small children, single men with their few possessions stuffed in backpacks, teens who left their houses on their own, drive home severity of the crisis. Despite the reports of corruption and human rights violations, the US continues to view the Hernandez government as one of its closest allies in the region, providing millions of dollars in aid to the Hernandez administration to support their military and police force. The Trump administration and the US State Department have not only recognized the legitimacy of the Hernandez government, despite reports of election fraud, they have also maintained that Honduras has made progress on human rights and fighting corruption. Further, due to lax US gun laws, nearly 50 percent of weapons found and traced at crime scenes in Honduras originate from the United States. 50%! We know that US weaponizes repressive governments around the globe through military aid, but rarely do we recognize the ways in which our domestic gun laws, or lack thereof, also serve to weaponize other countries.

Roxana Hernandez

On Wednesday afternoon I received a message from a fellow sponsor of the refugee caravan. At least 25 individuals who joined the caravan are gay, lesbian, or transgender persons fleeing violence, hate, and stigma. In the message, I was notified that a transgender woman who traveled to the United States with the caravan had died while in ICE custody in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her name was Roxana Hernandez. She was only 33 years old. According to ICE, the woman died from what appeared to be cardiac arrest. Seeking asylum, Roxana had been in custody at border detention for two weeks. Several immigrant advocacy groups claim Hernandez died due to medical negligence by immigration officials. She was detained in what immigration groups refer to as an “ice box,” a cold room, which lacks adequate food and medical care, and she was held in this “ice box” with the lights turned on 24 hours a day. After enduring these horrendous conditions, ICE brought her to Cibola County Correctional Center in Milan, New Mexico, a privately run federal prison for *men*. The next day she was taken to a local hospital with symptoms of pneumonia, dehydration and complications associated with HIV that she contracted after an assault on her body. After several hours she was transferred to the hospital in Albuquerque where she died in the intensive care unit. Dear Roxana, beloved woman of God, isolated, contained, tortured in the flesh, her body disposed in what can only be called a US concentration camp.

Contemporaneity of Jesus Christ and Roxana Hernandez

God’s solidarity with us in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ does not remain locked up in the past. The Good News of Easter is that the risen Jesus is present to us concretely, enfleshed among us, and particularly so in the crucified peoples of the earth. Christ makes Roxana Hernandez’s body *his* body, a body despised and rejected, a body cold and dehydrated struggling for life and grasping for freedom, his own. Christ calls Roxana *beloved*. In his body, in his flesh, Christ, too, has known derision and shame; his broken and exposed body are the marks of God’s deep love and fellowship with her.

Our fellowship with God and with another is deeply connected to God’s fellowship with Roxana and all those on the Caravan from Honduras. To remember Roxana is to remember Christ Crucified; such remembering refuses any easy piety or a romantic memorial. Our fellowship with God by the power of the Holy Spirit is connected to our fellowship with Roxana and all the families on the Caravan, because oppression such as this assaults not only Roxana’s body but it assaults us, it breaks our fellowship with one another as human beings beloved by God. The systems that assaulted Roxana’s body assaults each and every one of us, the social body, our basic connectedness to one another, by setting up a structural relation of domination that seeks to cut us off from the love that God has for us and from the love that is possible between us. Say her name! Roxana Hernandez. Say her name! Roxana Hernandez. Say her name! Roxana Hernandez. We have heard, we have seen, we have touched him, the author of 1 John says. Jesus was no mere idea. Jesus was flesh and blood. Jesus is *flesh and blood*.

“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.” The Father embraces us as human creatures as daughters and sons, as children of God. In this embrace, God extends fellowship with us, seeking to renew the relationships between us. When Roxanna suffers, we suffer. Our fellowship with Roxana, however, remains a mere memorial as long as we refuse to share relationship with others in flesh and blood, real fellowship not only with each other as members of Faith Mennonite, but with our sisters and brothers everywhere who suffer under the weight of the powers of the world. To live in fellowship with God always involves a particular *calling* to each and everyone of us, in our own way to contest evil and the destructiveness of sin’s power, by moving in relation to one another in love, especially in relation to those who do not have a place to call home, a place to eat and drink in peace, and to lay their head to sleep.

On Wednesday evening, just hours after having heard about Roxana’s death, I drove out to Burnsville to meet with a community of folks at a mobile home park called Sunny Acres. I arrived at the park at 6pm. Men and women were just getting off of work. We gathered in the yard of a home and after a few minutes about 12 families joined us. There were children jumping on trampolines, young fathers carrying crying babies, young girls clutching their mothers as Antonia Alvarez began to speak. She explained why she had convened the meeting. She had spent the afternoon and the weeks before knocking on doors hearing testimonies from people. ICE had been at the park. She told the parents to not let their children answer the door. She told the parents to prepare a plan to protect themselves. The families were scared, as you can imagine, because they loved each other and just want to stay together in peace. What was amazing to me about my time with these families is how connected I felt to each of them, even though I was only with them for an hour. We shook hands, we hugged one another, we made eye contact, we looked into each other’s eyes and spoke to one another. We testified to our shared fellowship, we testified to the Word of Life enfleshed among us. Now I gave them my phone number and told them that they could call me anytime. I also told them about all of you and your love for them and how we desire to share life with them in the flesh.