

GUARANTEED ENCOUNTER - IN CONFESSION  
A SERMON BASED ON 1 JOHN 1:1-9  
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO  
SUNDAY, AUGUST 5, 2018  
10:00 a.m.

This summer we are in a teaching series called Guaranteed Encounter.

It is a look at the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life.

While God is omnipresent, and therefore always close.

There are times where God comes especially close.

Times of Guaranteed Encounter.

The reading of the word of God,

the preaching of the Word of God

the gathering of the people of God in worship

the sacrament of the table, of baptism,

those are moments of Guaranteed Encounter.

Another place of Guaranteed Encounter

happens through the spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual Disciplines could also be called,

Spiritual Habits.

or Spiritual Exercises.

or Spiritual Practices.

As Christians we need to train.

We train ourselves in faith so that we can be strong in faith.

Show me someone with weak faith,

I can almost guarantee, they haven't trained.

Spiritual Disciplines train you so you can keep walking

the walk of faith,

when the obstacles, hills, valleys

and long stretches of open road

come into our lives.

Today's Spiritual Discipline, spiritual exercise, spiritual practice,

the place of Guaranteed Encounter with God.

Is confession.

I've told you about the book Post Secret before.

Its full title is Post Secret - Extraordinary Confessions From Ordinary Lives.

It was created by author Frank Warren and was first published in 2005.

It began with an idea Frank had for a community art project.

He handed out postcards to strangers

and left them in public places

asking people to write down a secret they had never told anyone

and mail it to him, anonymously.

The instructions were simple.

“You are invited to anonymously contribute a secret to a group art project.

Your secret can be a regret, fear, betrayal, desire

confession or childhood humiliation.

Reveal anything - as long as it is true

and you have never shared it with anyone before.

Be brief. Be legible. Be creative.”

The results were extraordinary.

The book description on the Amazon website describes the response

as ‘overwhelming’.

The secrets were both provocative and profound,

and some of the cards themselves were works of art,

carefully and creatively constructed by hand.

I still remember seeing that first book years ago  
while browsing in the bookstore.  
It was at the then Coles in Niagara Square.  
I remember being rooted to the spot as I flipped the pages,  
looked at the post cards  
and basically, heard confession.  
It was as if I was a priest in a confessional stall.

On a postcard decorated with post it notes and paperclips.

“I waste office supplies because I hate my boss.”

On a postcard with a picture of a cow,

and cut out print that looks like a ransom note.

“I gave my vegetarian sister a meal with beef. On purpose.”

With words printed on a label maker, stuck to a parking ticket.

“I got a parking citation and so did the car next to me.

I replaced the ticket on the car next to me with mine.

My ticket got paid.

And the one I took?

I mailed it to you at Post Secret.”

As you read through the cards you hear confession.

“I don’t care about recycling but I pretend I do.”

“I’m jealous of her baby.”

“I don’t wear my ring, because I don’t love her,  
not because I don’t like rings.”

I couldn’t put the book down, but neither could I buy it.

I couldn’t put the book down.

The secrets were absolutely compelling.

Because the truth is compelling.

The confessions were absolutely riveting

Because honesty is riveting.

But neither could I buy the book.

It was too raw.

The honesty was unsettling

the truth was unnerving

and I wasn’t sure I wanted to carry all those secrets around.

The secrets were an unravelling, an undoing, an unveiling

of all the good spin we put on ourselves,  
While I have seen and heard enough of life  
to know it isn't the case,  
I still prefer to believe the illusion  
that if you dig deep into a person's soul  
you would find gold,  
not sludge.  
But the sludge is there.  
I didn't want to take sludge home with me.

But I had been captivated, captured.

Secrets capture us.

Then they cage and imprison us, our souls.

There is a saying in counselling,

'A family is only as sick as its secrets.'

A secret becomes a mask, a cloak, a dungeon.

It becomes the locked room in the house,

a place where no one is allowed to go.

A secret makes the square footage of your life,  
smaller and smaller.

The more secrets, the more boundaried your life.

Jesus said, 'The truth will set you free.'

Jesus wants you to be free.

It is why confession is a spiritual discipline.

It is why in the Roman Catholic Church, confession is a sacrament.

If I was told I was only allowed to have one box of books,

one of the books that would make it into that box,

would be my copy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 'Life Together'

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Nazi Germany.

The book describes what it means to be a Christian community.

His last chapter is entitled confession and communion.

He begins the chapter with a verse from the Bible's book of James 5:16

'Confess your faults to one another.'

Then Bonhoeffer says,

'The one who is alone with his sin, alone with her sin, is utterly alone.'

It's because you have to hide who you really are,

or at least the complete version of who you are.

He goes on to explain that with confession,  
with honesty and truth,  
others would no longer see you as only the mask you wear,  
the facade you show.  
With honesty and truth you could be really known,  
known through to the core, sludge and all.

It is in that place of being really known,  
in the acceptance and forgiveness of true Christ-like community,  
you can finally experience  
and so believe,  
not just the idea that God loves the real you.  
But have the experience of the total you being loved.  
Not just the good parts.  
All of you.

You can try to manage what others see, but there are no secrets with God.  
There are no dark corners where you can hide.

The book of 1 John is a letter to a church.

1 John is different from most letters in the New Testament,



in that none of the regular features  
of a typical New Testament letter are present.

So some of put forward the possibility that rather than a letter,  
we have a sermon of John's,  
or perhaps a compilation of his teaching  
which was being circulated to the house churches.

Today we got to hear some of his message.

God is light.

There is no darkness at all in him.

Light exposes.

There have been numerous times,

in the rush to get the house ready for company,  
that I have helped clean the house in the evening,  
after the sun has gone down.

Dusting, glass cleaner on the front windows, a quick sweep.

It almost always looks fine.

In the evening.

It looks fine until the next morning when the sun streams in the windows,  
the bright light exposing my work.

Gigantic streaks on the windows,  
broad paths of dust on the furniture where I missed,  
dirt on the floor that didn't get swept.

Exposed by the light.

John said to the church, to us,  
'if we claim to have fellowship with God,  
yet walk in the darkness,  
we lie and do not live by the truth.

If we claim to be without sin,  
we deceive ourselves,  
and the truth is not in us.  
We make God out to be a liar.

We are walking in darkness.

We claim to have fellowship with God.

We claim to be without sin, or at least, major sin, or at least,  
not as bad as some in our sin.

We tend to minimize the presence of sin in our lives.

There is actually an area of research in Social Science,

an area that is quite well documented,

that speaks to our strong tendency to think,

that we aren't that bad,

or in fact, that we are better than we think.

It is something that social psychologists call The Self-Serving Bias.

It refers to the universal human tendency

to underestimate our shortcomings,

to compare ourselves to other people

and think we're doing better than we actually are,

to take more credit for stuff than we really deserve,

to exaggerate our abilities, our intentions, and our successes.

It is one of the most widely documented findings

in all of social science.

There was a survey of over 800,000 high school students,

and they were asked this question:

How do you rate yourself,

compared to other students,  
in your ability to get along with other people?  
Would you say that you are above average or below average?

There should be a median, a middle  
where half 50% would be above average,  
and half 50% would be below average.

The actual answer?

One hundred percent of high school students said:  
I'm above average in my ability to get along with other people.

Not only that,  
but 25 percent of these high school aged respondents,  
one in four of them  
estimated that they were in the top 1 percent  
in their ability to get along with other people.  
Someone's got to have it wrong.

People in the hospital as the result of a car accident,  
a collision that they caused by driving badly

rate themselves as “Above Average” drivers.

The icing on the cake is that

when this concept of a “Self-Serving Bias” is explained to people  
so that they understand it,

the vast majority of people say that they are above average  
in their ability to handle the “Self-Serving Bias.”

In our heads we can think we are doing better than we are.

I’m not perfect,

but I’m good, better than most.

Because look, I’m working hard.

Nice family pictures on the mantle,

lent my neighbour the lawnmower,

held my tongue that one time,

Gosh! I made it to church on a long weekend.

I’m good at an above average level.

Thing is,

God is not deceived by our self-serving bias.

John knew it was dangerous to think,

that you are without sin.

Letter in the letter he reminds the church.

Jesus he said,

is our atoning sacrifice,

it is Jesus who sets everything right with God

on our behalf.

He said

If we don't have Jesus,

we still have our sin,

we are still in the dark,

and we do not have fellowship with God.

To say we are without sin is to hide.

If we claim to be without sin,

we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

To make that claim is to hide from the fact

that we live with broken relationships,

distant relationships, broken because of jealousy, insecurity, pride,

greed, selfishness, cravings and addictions that hurt us

and those we love,  
broken because of words that fly out from our mouths  
like weapons of war.

To say we are without sin,  
is to hide from the fact there are many ways  
we can make the world a better place and don't,  
because we are so absorbed in our own worlds,  
we aren't even aware of other needs.

To say our choices never hurt anyone,  
To say we are basically good people,  
is to stay in the shadows,

God is light. And so God knows.

And if God knows, then what?

If God knows you have sinned,

if God already knows the things about you that you keep hidden

if God already knows the things about you

things about you that if we brought you up here on stage,

and revealed them,

would send you running to throw up

you would be so embarrassed and ashamed  
if God already knows those things, then now what?

Do we just say to each other - oh, it's not that bad.

You are only human.

Do you just diminish the sin, dismiss it, avoid it?

Does that really help?

I would rather a raw truth from my doctor,

then the lie of, it's not that bad.

Truth sets you free Jesus said.

It's in the beginning of Romans that we hear the list of how bad it is.

It sounds like a doctor pointing to all the breaks showing on the xray.

Here. Here. Here. Here. Here.

“They have become filled

with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice.

They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent,

arrogant and boastful;



they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents;  
they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

Although they know God's righteous decree  
they not only continue to do these very things  
but also approve of those who practice them.

And in case you are caught up thinking  
just how terribly bad those people are,  
wondering who the 'they' are that Paul is talking about,  
in case self-serving bias has kicked in  
and you are thinking that you are in the top one percent  
of Christians who are getting it right,  
Paul smashes that thinking to bits.

He says, you have no excuse,  
you who pass judgement on someone else,  
for at whatever point you pass judgement,  
you are condemning yourself,  
because you who pass judgement,

do the same things.

Here's the thing.

He's writing to the church.

It's a letter to the church.

Not to the people, 'out there'.

You - do the same things.

The closer we draw near to God,

the closer we get to the light,

the more we will see into the hidden sins in our heart,

and see the fear and insecurities that are driving us,

see that our craving to be loved and affirmed,

has us making poor choices again and again,

that instead of dealing with our pain,

we numb it with addictive behaviours.

It is easier to stand in the shadows,

to say, its not really that bad.

It's easier to stay on the edge of the Christian life,

rather than enter into deep discipleship,

and begin to dust out the corners of our lives.

The Psalmist describes the weight of trying to hide,  
of trying to cover up our sin,  
of trying to hold up the mask each and every day.

“When I kept silent,  
my bones wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night your hand was heavy on me.  
My strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you  
and didn't cover up my iniquity.  
I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.

The spiritual discipline is confession.

Don't hide.

Truth is, God knows.

But honesty is riveting.

Truth is compelling.

And God knows the truth will set you free.

Be truthful about what is in your soul.

Confess.

You have sinned. You sin. You will sin.

Sin will trap and imprison you and keep you in the shadows.

In God's grace, you can receive

the forgiveness and righteousness of Christ

in all dimensions of your life,

In your prayer life let God reveal to you the dark places,

expose them, so you can name them

be honest about them, and give them to Christ

to take to the cross.

Find a safe person with whom you can reveal the truth,

a person who has the deep humility of knowing their own sinfulness

and the deep grace of appreciating Christ's forgiveness and work.

With a counsellor, a minister, a trustworthy friend,

someone who can keep confidence and handle it,

pull back the curtain on the dark areas,  
so that God's light can allow you  
to begin dealing with the mould and dirt  
that gathers in our lives,  
and learn and experience, that there is acceptance  
of the real you in God's love.

It sounds ominous and threatening and scary,  
driving out the darkness.

Honestly looking at our brokenness and our wounds is, in my estimation,  
one of the most difficult aspects of living.

We want to hide it, cover it up, deny it and its significance.

But John puts the good news right in front of us.

If we confess our sins,

God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins

and purify us from all unrighteousness.

The Psalmist experienced it.

You forgave the guilt of my sin.

You are my hiding place.”

You don't have to hide in the dark.

The light of God his forgiveness

is the safe place to hide.

God wants to give you your freedom.

The truth will set you free.

Confess.

He is faithful.

Accept his grace.

Receive forgiveness.

Experience being loved in your entirety.

Stand in the light.

Be free.

Amen.