

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia

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“One”

John 8:12

George C. Anderson

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”



Let’s go back to the beginning of the pandemic—not to talk about the pandemic, but about *preaching to a camera in an empty sanctuary*. It was not the experience I thought it would be.

On Sunday mornings, I want to see familiar and new faces in front of me and in the choir loft behind me. Even when you laugh at me getting a name wrong or skipping over something in the order of worship, I enjoy being with you. The shared worship, the handshakes, the catching up with each other; I love it all.

So, in March of 2020, when we did what we were instructed to do and canceled in-person worship, I was *not* looking forward to preaching to a camera. We were accidental geniuses when, not knowing a pandemic was a possibility, we ordered livestream equipment months before, but the equipment would not show up until two weeks after in-person worship was shut down. So, that first Sunday in a sanctuary of empty pews, I would preach to Jen Brothers’ iPhone. “*This is going to be awkward*,” I thought.

I was surprised—*shocked*—to discover it was not awkward at all. In fact, *it was intimate*. There was no learning curve or adjustment period either. It was an immediately intimate experience to preach to that iPhone that Sunday and then to the camera once the livestream equipment was installed.

What I realized in preaching to the camera was that I was speaking to just *one person*. On the other side of the screen, there might be more than one person—a couple or a family perhaps—but



each person looking at their smartphone, computer, ipad, or T.V. saw me looking directly at *her*—directly at *him*. Several hundred people might be watching at once in different places, *but* they are not all sitting in the same room with Anne Horton, or Tom and Rose Marie Jones, or those gathered to watch the service in the theater at Woodland Hills. I wasn't speaking to a crowd; I was speaking *to one person*. There just happened to be hundreds of “ones” out there.

Of course, it is different now. The sanctuary—thank God—is no longer a beautiful television studio but has become again a place to gather for worship. Still, with the 11:00 o'clock service, we have not gone back to how it was before. Now we have a “Hybrid Service” with the congregation including people in the pews and people on the other side of the screen.

And for those watching the service online, the experience is different than it was from when the sanctuary was empty. Now I have people in the pews to look at and this old preacher-of-habit sometimes forgets to glance at the camera now and then. This means that the one watching online is no longer being directly addressed but has more of an experience of—

- looking in,
- listening in,
- overhearing.

Not that those watching online are bothered by that. There are advantages to worshipping in a space of anonymity—like watching a play in a darkened theater. It is like you are not there, so you can let your guard down, be more vulnerable, take in what you see and hear without being judged or examined—without being implicitly asked “[What do you think?](#) [Are you enjoying yourself?](#) [Do you like it?](#) [Do you agree?](#)”

Also—and this is something we all need to be aware of—there are those who attend worship online to

- check us out,
- gather intel,
- assess whether this congregation might be a good fit.

This is the way it is now. Visiting a church online before visiting in-person is now standard operating procedure. Over the last four years, *most* of those who have joined Second Presbyterian Church first checked us out online—

- read online reviews,
- studied our website,
- watched at least one service on our YouTube page.

This is a *good* thing. It is helpful for those-of-us-who-know-the-church-well to remember how little some people know about this church when they first visit. They wonder, *legitimately*,

- Is this a healthy place or an unhealthy place?
- Is this a faith community, or a clique, or a cult?



- Is the church science-friendly or science-averse?
- Will they care how I voted? Is this a **Maga Red Church** or a **Progressive Blue** church
 - where *heretics* are now defined by whether you support or criticize the president, or the side of an issue you are on?
- Will I be looked down on
 - for how I look,
 - or because I don't know much about the Bible
 - and don't know why Presbyterians
 - believe in the Holy Catholic Church
 - and why they have to confess their debts,
 - and “**how do you spell Presbyterian anyway?**”
- Will I be looked down on *because I doubt what I think they believe?*

And let's remember that some have had bad church experiences and want to know if Second Presbyterian is safe for them. Are we into shaming people, canceling people, demonizing people?

Not that I know what I'm talking about, but it seems to me that checking out a church online is like using a dating app. It is a way to check out a church from a safe distance before taking the risk of an in-person meeting.

The rest of my sermon is for everyone, but I have those online visitors especially in mind. As an introduction for them and as a reminder for the rest of us, I want to describe the kind of church community we are. And because I have online visitors in mind, I'm going to look at the camera a lot. So, for this Sunday, everyone in the sanctuary will have some of that experience of overhearing—which is OK because as I said before, overhearing has its advantages.



I will begin with what I think is the **one essential** reason we exist as a faith community. A lot of what our church offers can be found outside the church; fellowship, study, opportunities to serve. But while these are important expressions of who we are and what we believe, none of them are the one essential reason we exist. The essential reason we exist is *to bear witness to the grace of God that shines through Jesus*. The “light” our passage speaks of is the light of God's grace. Our essential witness is to God's grace, and God's grace should shine in what we say as a community, how we act toward each other within the community, and in what we do out in the world.

This one *essential* message is also our most *intimate* message. I want each of you to hear this as if we were back in the days of the empty sanctuary when it seemed the preacher was speaking just to the one watching online. God's grace is for you individually. We want you personally to know there is nothing that will separate you from God's love that shines in Jesus.



Now, let's fill up the sanctuary again. While this message of grace is for each one of us individually, it cannot stop there. God's grace is given so that we, who are a collection of “ones,”



might *be one* in Christ. The business of the church, then, is the business of reconciliation. In witnessing to God's grace, we witness to the power of God's grace to work reconciliation *within* us, *between* us, and *in* the world.

Everything else that I have to say about Second Presbyterian is, I hope, about ways we bear witness to the grace of God—the one essential reason we exist.

Our witness to God's grace begins in worship. We want our worship to be interesting and engaging, but our goal in worship is not to provide entertainment. That is because the *object* of our worship is *not* you or me, but God. So, our music, our liturgy, our sermons, and our prayers are all to help draw us to transcendence—draw us out of ourselves to God. We see worship as a pause—a chance to step out of—away from the busy-ness of our lives to be in a moment when we remember *our* need and *God's* grace. We don't preach a Prosperity Gospel here. We don't make false promises of health, wealth, and happiness if you will only worship God and do what we tell you to do. We preach of God's grace that is there for us in all times, and maybe especially in our darkest and hardest times.

- When we are arrogant in our virtue,
 - worship reminds us of our sin.
- When we are ashamed of ourselves,
 - worship reminds us of our worth.

and all because worship draws the focus from our claims to God's claim on us.

If you are looking to worship like that, you might find it here.



Here at Second Presbyterian, we ask questions. We seek understanding and insight. So, we study and learn.

- We offer classes,
 - Sunday mornings and during the week—no surprise there.
- We bring in outstanding theologians and Bible scholars as speakers.
- We have some classes online if you want to check them out.

In those classes, we strive to hear God's voice and discern God's will—trying most of all to gain some wisdom in what it means to live with grace in the world as it is today.

- We encourage questions
- We don't expect everyone to agree.
- We certainly don't fight science. We think science and theology as different forms of inquiry that should be partners in seeking truth—
 - holding each other accountable
 - to facts,
 - to mystery,
 - and to what is decent, and right, and good, and ethical.



There is one more thing I want to say about our education. Our classes and studies are about learning, but they are more about *creating community* among others who are trying to figure out what it means to know God's grace and follow Jesus.

If you are looking for all the answers, we can't help you. But if you are looking for a community that seeks wisdom and explores the mystery that is God, you may want to explore some of what we have to offer.



Let me tell you about Second Presbyterian as a community.

We seek to be a community where grace guides how we are together. God's grace is a ministry among us and share in that ministry by being graceful with each other—caring for each other in a way that reflects God's care for us.

- If folks are in the hospital and let us know,
 - we'll check on them and pray for them.
- If someone needs to talk with a pastor who will listen with grace and support—
 - which is not the same as agreeing or disagreeing—
 - you'll find that here.
- We call those who need a call
 - or deliver flowers to those who can no longer make it to church.
- When there is a memorial service,
 - It is church members who are ushers and who provide food for the reception.

We have fellowship programs—lots of them—that bring people together

- *children* together,
- *adults* together,
- *all ages* mixed together.

Of course, there are all kinds of ways you can find community in the Roanoke Valley that have nothing to do with churches. So, I will say it again. What makes a healthy church community unique is in its intentional efforts to embody God's grace. We set boundaries here, because we want to protect people (children most of all). But we seek to live out the truth that your inherent value comes of God loving you and claiming you—

despite what you think makes you unacceptable
and despite what you think makes you special.



Some would love to find a church where it *stops right there*,

- find a place to escape from the world's problems, debates and issues,
- find a place where you can be reminded of God's love and feel special as a child of God.



Well, we're not that church. It doesn't take long to figure this out about us. We can't stop by showing grace only to those within our church community. We must make a witness to God's grace in the world. We commit a lot of resources—volunteer hours and financial resources—to address real issues and real needs.

But we try to stay humble about this.

- We don't have all the answers and can't settle the debates.
- We can't save the world.
- We can't solve all your problems, the valley's problems, the world's problems.

And if you are looking for a church that plants flags about where we stand on political and social issues—with the flags being bright shades of **red** or **blue**—then this congregation will disappoint you. We value too much what is increasingly disappearing in American society but is increasingly needed: in American society; being a community that holds people who see the world differently together. So, we actively work *not* to become that Red or Blue chapel of social and political stands.

But, that does not mean we can ignore human issues and needs. We can't do that when we know that Jesus did not ignore human issues and needs. What we *can* do—what we *must* do—is talk to each other, *listen* to each other, study, pray, find enough common ground to do something together that will bear witness to God's reconciling grace—which is the world's true hope.

I'll give you some examples:

- Debate about affordable health care continues in our country. We don't wait until the debate is settled. We find ways to provide health care to those who need it most here in the Roanoke Valley at the Horizon Clinic and in the Dominican Republic where we have sent many medical teams. **We don't solve the problem, but what we do is a witness to God's grace.**
- Debate continues about affordable housing. We don't wait to settle the debate or get all the answers. We find ways to support ministries that
 - house the homeless,
 - keep some families from becoming homeless,
 - and help get other families in housing they can afford.

We haven't solved the problem, but we make a witness to God's grace.

- We know we can't solve hunger, addiction, and abuse of children but we're doing what we can and we help a lot of people. **We don't help all, but we help many, and it is a witness to God's grace.**
- While the debate continues about racism, the major thing we do is not telling the world how to solve racism but to build an inter-racial community through a program called *The Bible in Black and White* where people of different races and who live in different neighborhood gather on Wednesdays to study, listen, develop friendships, and even love for each other.



Even within the group we don't have racism figured out. But we are together trying, and by doing that we make a witness to God's grace.



I hope I've presented a good profile of our church. I hope I haven't made it seem like our church is more than it is. We fall short in every area I described. But I've tried to be honest in describing our *genuine aim*. Our genuine aim is to be true to the only essential reason we exist: to bear witness to the light of God's grace in Jesus.

But, listen, if you are checking this church out, you have the right to wonder if you can trust what I have said to be true. Preachers can be hucksters.

So, going back to my earlier analogy, I encourage you to take what I have said in this sermon as if you were reading our profile on a *church dating app*. If you are interested in seeing if the relationship is worth taking to the next level, then take steps you are comfortable with and feel safe to you.

- Maybe start by exploring our website and reading our Second Sheets (what we call our newsletter, which you can find on the website).
- Ask around in the community to find out about us. I can't control what everyone says about us but do it anyway. It is a risk worth taking.
- Every week, one of the pastors sends out an email letter, and attached to it is a lot of information about what is going on. If you trust us *not* to sell your email address to some religious organization or fill up your In-box, ask to be put on our email list.
- If you get to the place where you want to have coffee with a member of the staff, let us know.

Finally, if you are ready, come join us in person for worship, or for something else—a midweek class, a Bible study, a retreat. Being here in person is not a requirement, not even for membership. When we say, “[Welcome to a worship service of Second Presbyterian Church](#),” that welcome is for everyone, even those who want to remain on the other side of the screen.

But, if you are local and are ready to come to see faces and get to know others who are also seeking to know and share God's grace, please come. Speaking for myself, it is wonderful having a community of familiar faces, of shared stories, of inside jokes, of mutual caring. Most of all, there is something especially wonderful about being physically involved in a church community that remembers the one essential reason it exists—to bear witness to God's grace

- in the way we are together
- and in the way we serve in the world.

