

“The Joy of Fellowship—Vulnerable, without Walls” based on 1 John 1:1-2:2 and John 20:19-31
Delivered on April 11, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Having children while in graduate school, has forever changed the way I look at the movies. This applies especially those that my kids watch repeatedly, so bear with me today, please. The truth is that Claire and I are often breaking our kid’s movies down, point by point, as if we are preparing for a doctoral dissertation on their deep meanings.

One of the movies I have now seen about 1,000 times is Frozen. It’s the story of a young girl named Elsa with magical power over snow and ice, who early in life nearly kills her sister. So then, with her parents, she tries to hide her powers. But her parents die and when she is old enough, Elsa becomes queen. At her coronation, her sister Anna asks to marry a guy she just met. Well, as you might expect, the powers just came out, in frustration. And with her secret out, Elsa, the queen, runs away. She abandons her kingdom, to an eternal winter.

If you don’t have young children, you may not know the movie, but you may know, ‘Let it Go!’ The song, ‘Let it Go,’ was a top 5 song on the charts, winning an Oscar and a Grammy. Our culture latched on to it as an anthem for personal freedom and expression. But while the song is beautiful, ‘Let it Go’ misses the point of the movie.

To know this movie by this song, undermines the message of Frozen. It was perfect for a moment in the movie, but not for the movie as a whole, which at its climax highlights the self-giving love of Anna, the sister who gives her life to save Elsa from a sword. The song misses the resolution and revelation, when Elsa realizes her powers and identity cannot be contained or concealed, nor can they be just let go without limits. Rather, they must be governed, by her love for others.

The song lays out two extremes for what it means to express ourselves as humans. The first, what Elsa lived in her life up until then, is to conform to the group at all costs. And so, Elsa sings of this repression, saying, *‘Don’t let them in, don’t let them see. Be the good girl you always have to be. Conceal, don’t feel, don’t let them know.’* This happens in our lives. We feel a pressure to conform, to do what it takes to stay in a group. And this kind of repression can feel like persecution, because we fear our neighbors, we fear how others will react to us and how they will treat us. So, Elsa feels she will be an outcast, or worse.

In this extreme, appearances mean everything – you have to look the part. If Elsa reveals what is inside of her, she is afraid of what will happen. So, for all of her life, she had been hiding behind walls.

Then the other extreme is what Elsa feels in this song is the only reasonable option. Her secret gets out, people see her powers, and so, she believes, or maybe knows, that she will not be accepted, that people will judge her and reject or kill her. So, Elsa runs away. She climbs a mountain to get away from everyone. She thinks that by pushing everyone away, she can be free to be herself, that is, she can be authentically who she thinks she is. She thinks she’s not hurting anyone but being herself.

This is when she sings her anthem and declares her freedom. She sings, *'Can't hold it back anymore, Let it go, let it go, turn away and slam the door. I don't care what they're going to say, Let the storm rage on. The cold never bothered me anyway.'* It doesn't matter if the cold bothers anyone else, it's about her. Yet, by running away to be free, she still hides behind walls, but now, she hides behind metaphorical walls.

I think we do this to protect ourselves, but in the end, it does two things to further isolate us. First, it keeps us from receiving what we need most – Love from God and one another. Second, this action tends to repress others, forcing them to bend to our rules, to receive our love.

Elsa declares that now, *'the fears that once controlled me can't get to me at all. It's time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through. No right, no wrong, no rules for me, I'm free. Let it go, let it go...You'll never see me cry. Here I stand and here I stay,'* and continues, *'I'll rise like the break of dawn. That perfect girl is gone, Here I stand in the light of day. Let the storm rage on, the cold never bothered me anyway.'*

But the problem is that her actions do affect others – all relationships require rules. There has to be an agreed upon way in which we interact. So, no rules for one person, no rules for Elsa, means an imposition of rules on anyone she encounters. Regardless of the eternal winter in the movie, setting that plot aside, Elsa separates herself, and this affects her sister, who pursues her up the mountain, wanting to embrace her sister, forgive and bring her back. In another song, Anna sings: *For the first time in forever, I finally understand.*

Sadly, this fantastic scenario is far more realistic, especially in the church, than we realize. We see a culture in the church seeking conformity over community, uniformity over unity. I have been encouraging you over this past year of pandemic to pray prayers of lament. These are prayers that acknowledge to God that things are not as they should be. I do this, because I believe this is a lost art of prayer, because we try to hard to maintain appearances, and people think it is somehow unfaithful, or wrong. We think we can't express our feelings with one another; we can't express our doubt, and our struggle. We maintain appearances as these things undermine our faith from within.

But lament is a foundational form of prayer. It is a tool that God intends for us to deal with these problems. And it isn't something to only do alone in our personal lives. We must lament together. We must confess together, tell the truth, by sharing our feelings and concerns, our doubts and fears, and be vulnerable before one another. We don't bring these things to church, because we fear it makes us 'look' less like Christians. And too often, the end result, is that those who do doubt or fear, without dealing with it, run away like Elsa.

In today's reading, the apostles are gathered, like young Elsa, behind walls out of fear. They don't want to face the Judean leaders, rightly believing that they will be killed. But Jesus enters through their walls and greets them with peace. He shows them his wounds and gives them a commission, to forgive sins. And right away, they get their first test – Thomas had missed the whole thing. He comes and boldly says, that he doesn't believe any of them. He has 11 credible friends, but he says, 'you said it, but I'm not believing it.'

But notice what the apostles don't do—they don't kick Thomas out. He's around for a week, still with them, even when he does not believe, and is basically calling his friends liars. He's included in among the disciples, and he is there with them when he gets his encounter, his chance to experience, the risen Jesus. This gospel and the letter of John say a lot about the church, because Jesus wants people to encounter him here in the church. And so, we need to offer that opportunity. We need to be a safe place so that even if someone doesn't believe everything, they can be here so they will have that opportunity to encounter Jesus.

Friends, the Holy Spirit which the disciples received from Jesus is our church's binding force. It's not our culture that brings us together. It's not our customs, our appearances and not our buildings, or anything else. The Holy Spirit is with the Father and the Son in the holy Trinity, binding it in love. And this is what binds each of us to each other as a community of faith. 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,' John's letter says. Indeed, if we put ourselves out there based on our appearances, we only deceive ourselves, because we are all sinners. Even the most faithful, have areas of doubt too. Because if we never doubted, we'd never sin. Doubt is what makes us prone to sin.

Yet, doubt is not the opposite of our faith or faithfulness. Certainty is more dangerous as what pulls us from faith. When we think that we know everything there is to know, we become self-assured. Both in our doubt, even if we sin, if we are faithful to confess, or tell the truth, we rely not on ourselves, but on Jesus, our Lord and savior. And Jesus is our advocate. When we are certain about our righteousness, and when we are certain about someone else's unrighteousness, we put barriers up, we put up walls, to keep real faith out.

And so, for the extreme conformist and the extreme non-conformist, it is the same result. The one who claims to have no sin calls God a liar, and the one who runs away does so also. Friends, notice what John writes in the opening of the letter, about fellowship. He says they declare who Jesus is, the man who lived among them, to be the Word of Life, who is one in fellowship with the Father, and so, if Jesus, is both God and human, that means we can have life through fellowship with Jesus for eternity. John is inviting the reader to join with him, perhaps telling a reader to return to him, and be, or be again, in fellowship, to make his joy complete.

Friends, John is trying to show why the Christian community is supposed to stand out. First, it has the truth that God shared in our humanity, to be heard, seen, and touched. To receive this message is an invitation into fellowship with God and the church, a place in which we are supposed to bring things into the light, to share our sins, our doubts, our fears, all that might otherwise keep us from God, and pull them out of the darkness, so we can walk in light together.

This passage about repentance is not a threat, but an affirmation of the humility they seek. That they will not say they do not sin, but bring it to light before Jesus. And it is Jesus who called them to preach the forgiveness of sin. This is about coming to Jesus, coming to the church, to one another, in an honest way and letting love of God and neighbor change us. This is about coming as you are and leaving changed.

John says he is writing this so that those who read it may not sin. This is because the only way to not sin is to live in total faithfulness to this truth. But that's not possible for us, so John says, if we do sin, then Jesus, the Messiah, the Righteous One, pleads our case, because Jesus shared in our humanity, knows our limits, and by his life, death and resurrection has liberated us from sin.

Friends, this is our calling, this is the type of community that Jesus calls us to be. The church is not supposed to be a gathering of perfection, but a hospital for sinners. Our calling is to rest in this truth, and so by knowing Jesus we can avoid sin, but if we sin, it is not on us to hide it, but to bring it out and be forgiven. By this, we remember that we all sin, all of us. No one's sin is worse than another's, so we must not judge others.

When Rob Perry asked if he could provide a piece for special music a month or so ago, he shared with me the lyrics of his song, which are beautifully vulnerable and honest. In Rob's words, we see the bearing of his soul, as he has faced trials in his life. Are praying hands and emojis all that we are called to do as Christians? No. But in his vulnerability, he admits that this is all he can do right then. And so, these are the loving touch of God's grace through him.

They come in an old world, where we walk an old road, and that road it leads to nowhere. It leads to the problems of this life, for which Rob offers prayers, from his brokenness. But as we read in Mark's gospel, Jesus offers us a new road to walk with us. And as John's letter states, Jesus offers a coming age, a new world, a new creation, in which we live with our God.

Rob's words are like Thomas, because while they are not an expression of a lack of faith. They show a reasonable human feeling, namely wondering if we have anything to offer. But Rob's pledge of praying hands, a simple smile, an emoji (a text message graphic) to share God's grace, show a desire to remain connected, to be in community in our lives. This is not to run away, but to give what we have, even if it isn't much. Rob and Thomas desire to come as they are. They do not run. Thomas returns to his fellow disciples with what he has—his doubts and his fears, his wounds. And he wants to see Jesus's wounds. He wants to see that it is Jesus, and when he does see a risen but wounded Jesus, he says, 'My Lord and my God.'

This is important – because John's gospel opens and closes with the vulnerability of Jesus. The opening of the gospel famously says that, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. The Word was God...and that Word became flesh and dwelled among us.' This is why I emphasize the Trinity so much – God in three persons – all equally God, yet each distinct, in community and bound by love. God doesn't need humanity to have community. God wants us for it. To say, 'Jesus died for us,' is to say God went through death, and by the Spirit which cannot be conquered, raised the body of Jesus, the Son in our flesh, to be alive again, scars and all, in fellowship with the Father and us.

As we look to expand our re-gathering numbers, and begin to come together in fellowship, let us remember that fellowship is not merely having coffee and delicious cake in Madden Hall. No, fellowship is literally in Greek to share a common life. It is to share a common life bound by the Spirit's love. If we worry too much about how we are perceived, how we may look holy, then

we go against this common life by deceiving ourselves. And if we reject the community or abandon it as Elsa does, for some kind of 'you only live once' attitude, then we miss out on fellowship and forgiveness.

Our rules, our walls, our boundaries, our running, can keep us from living by self-giving love. Some boundaries are needed and healthy. But others put our light in darkness, and yes, I know that Jesus can go through the walls, but the barriers we put up to keep others out, still keep us from knowing this love in and through each other.

It should be our goal that in the church should never be a place we learn to judge. It should be the place where we learn to love as God loves us. It should be a place to safely express our needs, our fears and even our doubts, without excluding others based on their needs, their fears, or their doubts. As a church, we're our best when we are a safe space, walking in the light, not by claiming to be perfect, to feel like we are better than someone else. It should be a place where all are safe to share doubts and even our wounds in a common life together, so that our joy may be complete – the joy of fellowship with God, and one another. Amen.