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Title: Side Effects

Preaching: Ryan Hazen, Lead Pastor, Mud Creek Campus

Scripture: [1 John 1:1-2:2](#)

E-mail: [Ryan Hazen](#)

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There's been a lot of talk recently about vaccines. I heard this week that the conversation about vaccines has now overtaken the weather as the first thing to talk about when making small talk with someone. It goes something like this - Have you had your vaccine? A single dose or double? What kind did you get? When did you get it? Where

did you get it? Did you get stickers? And, the reason for talking about this in a sermon - what side effects did you have? In case you were wondering about me - yes, double, Pfizer, tomorrow is two weeks after the second shot, Hancock Regional Hospital, got stickers both times, sore arm.

If you watch any TV at all, you can't miss the advertisements for various prescription drugs. The issue I have with those commercials is that about 25% of the ad is how it might help you and the remaining 75% of the ad is about the possible negative side effects. I looked up the transcript of one such advertisement and the end of it goes something like this. Instead of using its name, I'll just say "DRUG."

"DRUG can lower your ability to fight infections. Serious and sometimes fatal infections including tuberculosis and cancers, including lymphoma, have happened as have blood, liver, and nervous system problems, serious allergic reactions, and new or worsening heart failure. Before treatment, get tested for TB. Tell your doctor if you've been to areas where certain fungal infections are common and if you've had TB, hepatitis B, are prone to infections or have flu-like symptoms or sores. Don't start DRUG if you have an infection." Add to that tripling the speed of the tape so you can barely understand any of the side effects. ¹

Almost every activity in our life has side effects. We think of side effects most often when we're talking about drug or vaccine interactions but almost everything we do has side effects. Sometimes they are positive and sometimes negative. Sometimes they are major - like tuberculosis and cancers - and sometimes they are barely noticeable - like my sore arm.

Sometimes these side effects just impact a small area or one individual, sometimes they impact the world. Today, the writer of First John tells of some side effects of being a follower of Jesus. It is helpful to first understand where this writer finds himself.

The writer of the letter is engaged in a salvage operation. He is trying to salvage the church community that has been having disagreements around some theological understandings. We're not exactly sure but the issue appears to be related to which is more important - the humanity or the divinity of Jesus. Jesus as the divine had so captivated some of these believers so much that they appear to have played down his humanity and perhaps denied it altogether. The writer was certainly inspired by the gospel of John but there is debate whether it is the same person. Most scholars conclude that the two John's are not the same person. For our purposes, it's not that important.

There is a connection however as the gospel writer in John 17 has Jesus praying above all for the unity of believers. By the time First John is written, that prayer had not been realized and there is certainly division. The writer of the letter describes himself as an elder. He is trying to retrieve the situation before it is too far gone and there is no hope of reconciliation.

The situation is delicate. If he comes through in a heavy-handed way, he will drive some to join the dissident group. His solution is to assert and repeat some key themes on which there was still agreement in both groups. It's a key premise in negotiation skills. Start where you have agreement. All would affirm that God is light. Then, he would challenge them when they insist they are pure or above sinning. All would affirm the importance of truth, but he confronts them on the need for integrity. He begins his message by asserting that we simply must face up to our wrongdoing and not deny it.

While sensitive hearers would recognize that the author wants those dissidents to admit the error of their ways and return to the fold, they would also hear that the author is stating realities that apply in every age. Clearly, for the writer, God is more concerned about right relationships and restoring fractured ones than about the humanity or divinity of Jesus. Saying 'God is light' is not metaphysical speculation, but a call to honesty and integrity on the part of all parties. ²

The God who is light will later in First John be designated the God who is love. "Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." (1 John 4:7-8). It is not the fear of God that

evokes the call to confess, but the initiative of the God who cares and wants us to begin anew.

The author uses two positive side effects of being Christian to make his case for these two groups to stay connected to one another. He lays them out in verse 7 of the first chapter:

"...if we walk in the light as he himself is the light..." NUMBER 1 – "we have fellowship with one another" and NUMBER 2 – "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7)

For this writer, such images succeeded in articulating what the writer of the gospel of John saw encapsulated in the very living person of Jesus as he encountered his contemporaries and invited them to life in God. He invites the hearers to open their eyes wide to see the breadth of God's love – to walk in the light.

When we walk in the light, we have a built-in, flesh and blood community called the church. Real human relations are not an encumbrance but are themselves the place where God the divine can be seen. We are the human form of Jesus who now resides with God. This is the place that we experience the side effect of calling ourselves Christian that gives us fellowship with one another – the opportunity to be part of a community – a community that can do more together than anyone can do individually.

Later in First John, you will read that the 'spirituals' – those that were more concerned with the divinity of Jesus – have become carried away to a degree that they have neglected such very basic things as helping a neighbor in need. Ideals have a way of blinding people to everyday justice, leading sometimes to people fighting the battles of freedom on behalf of the world while scarcely comprehending the fate of those crushed in the process right before their eyes.

People make mistakes; sometimes they are disastrous. At this point in the letter, the writer is asserting that even in our worst failures there is grace and it should permeate who we are as a Christian community of believers. The first side effect then is that "we have fellowship with one another." When that happens, we care for one another and have a family that is beyond biological.

The second side effect of walking in the light of God is the best in my opinion. "If we walk in the light as he himself is the light...the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." Here we are – one week after the joyous celebration of Easter and First John 1 brings us swiftly face-to-face with the

reality of sin. The usual text for today is what is commonly called – Doubting Thomas. It’s the story of what happens when Jesus, on Easter evening, appears to the disciples then, a week later, appears to Thomas who wants confirmation of a risen Jesus with his own eyes.

Our writer’s point seems to force us to see if we are going to live like people who believe what we said in this very place one week ago today. I said, “Christ is Risen” and you said back to me “He is risen indeed.” I heard you. I was here. If we believe Jesus rose from the dead, then we must likewise believe that the cross that made Jesus a candidate for resurrection in the first place was the only way to bring about a life that now cannot die. It was the only way to forgive sin.

We tend not to talk about sin much and hardly ever coming so soon after Easter but maybe that’s the right time to do it. Jesus died and rose because of our sin so maybe it’s exactly the right day to talk about it a bit. There is the old preacher joke of a minister telling a friend that he’s going to preach on sin on Sunday. The friend asks, “where are you going to end up – are you for it or against it?” Let me just go on record by saying that I’m against sin.

The writer of First John addresses sin in two ways in our scripture for today. First, there is the idea of intentionally and consistently walking in the darkness of sin. For anyone who claims to be a believer in Jesus, that is impossible. When you are a follower of Jesus you walk in the light. The light and the dark cannot coexist. You cannot try to walk in the light and have a heart of darkness on the inside.

Most of us, since we’re in church in the first place, fall into the second camp. The writer concedes something that can happen and does happen without necessarily threatening one’s entire identity as a disciple: one will now and then sin. Such a person is not wallowing in sin. Such a person is not willfully harboring darkness or walking in darkness or having no true joy over new life in Jesus. Yet mistakes are made. Slip-ups happen. In a moment of weakness, you lose your temper and yell at somebody. You eat a little more than you should, drink a little more than you should, tell a white lie (or a not-so-white lie) to make yourself look better.

These things happen, First John says. Maybe they shouldn’t and maybe we wish they didn’t but there it is: we sin. In addition to warning against big-time wallowing in sin — children of darkness masquerading as children of the light—this text gives a pastoral word for more commonplace sins that come our way. The good news for us is held in the first two verses of 1 John 2 included in today’s scripture. “I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father,

Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not for ours only but also for the sins of the world.” (1 John 2:1-2) We still have an Advocate, we still have a Savior, we still can and will be forgiven.

Jesus – whether you think of him as more human or more divine or if you've never really thought about it before, is still our Advocate with God. We illustrate this to our pastor's class students by showing them two pictures. The first picture shows a human being on one side of a giant canyon and God on the other side. We ask the kids how the man in the picture can get to God. There are always some innovative ideas out of our 5th graders. Jump – too far. Zipline – no place to anchor the ends. Airplane – no place to take off. Build a bridge – no materials. After we've shot down every good idea they have, we show them the second picture.

The second picture drops a cross between the two cliffs. It is Jesus and what he did for us on the cross that allows us direct access to God. It's that second side effect that our author raises – through the blood of Jesus, we have direct access to God because Jesus is our advocate.

I'm wondering if the writer of First John would have cared to write a commercial for television about walking in the light of God that would include the side-effects. It might go something like this:

FOLLOWING CHRIST gives you an advocate with God in all situations. You can access the advocate day or night. Walking in the light will strengthen your spiritual and mental health and positively impacts your spiritual health. Do not be concerned when members of the body lift you in prayer unprompted. Other expected side effects include helping others in need without expectation of repayment and hearing weeks, months, even years later about the impact you've had on someone's life. Please do not follow Christ unless you fully understand these side effects.

¹ <https://www.humira.com/citrate-free/transcript-redesignedforyou>

² Commentary help from First Thoughts on Year B Epistle Passages from the Lectionary Easter 2 by William Loader found at www.staff.murdoch.edu.au.