

“The Gospel According to Susan Boyle”
1 John 1:1 – 2:2
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Preached April 19, 2009 at San José, Costa Rica

If you want a glimpse into the Kingdom of Heaven, just take a look at Simon Cowell’s face as Susan Boyle sings. I’m referring, of course, to the video sensation now sweeping the planet that is turning grown men into sniveling snails, and cynics into softies. For those of you who have not yet seen Ms. Boyle sing her Scottish, forty-seven year old, never-been-kissed heart out, you simply must, and you can find a link to it in last week’s Emerge. Mind you, I am not usually even tempted to pass on this kind of pop culture Internet stuff. For all the Internet chain letters I have stopped in their tracks, I should be suffering unmercifully. But this one was just too good to keep to myself, well, as if that were really possible seeing as how the clip has been viewed more than 12 million times on YouTube alone. But back to Simon Scowl, I mean Cowell.

Simon Cowell is one of the judges on Britain’s Got Talent, the show on which Ms. Boyle appeared, and on the US version called American Idol, shows on which budding performers compete for fame and the grand prize of a recording contract. Simon is the surly judge, the one who often has his face twisted up in a scowl. He is roundly criticized for being quite negative, even though he is a good judge of talent and it is his role to play to maintain the dynamic of the show. Yet on this occasion, while simply beautiful music poured out of a frankly, less than

beautiful package, the camera paused on a shot of pure rapture on Simon's face, a joy I recognized immediately as the joy we read about tonight from First John: "We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." Simon Scowl was transformed into Simon Wow, changed by the most unexpected of events. The look on his face is the look I expect to see on the faces of the communion of the saints when I get to heaven.

Well, I am not here to testify about Susan Boyle or Simon Cowell. I am here to testify about Jesus Christ, just as his early followers did so that John can write about them, "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, and have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it, and testify to it." The life revealed that they watched, heard, and touched, were the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, those we celebrated last Sunday, and those we hold onto every day in the face of our challenges and our daily grinds. Their lives were transformed, like Simon's face, by the most unexpected of events, and they cannot hold back that experience, and so they testify to it with all their heart and soul. They experienced it first hand, and authentically, and even gruesomely, and they were determined to tell the story no matter what the cost.

But even as I am not here to testify about Susan Boyle or Simon Cowell, I do see in this viral video phenomenon something the church needs to pay attention to. I mean, my sermons do not receive 12 million hits a week on our website, and

they are at *least* as surprisingly beautiful as Ms. Boyle's voice, so people, we have a lot of work to do here. But seriously, what is worth paying attention to here is that this phenomenon is not proceeding because of a slick, Internet-driven campaign to sell advertising, but because everyone who sees Simon Cowell's face, and hears Susan Boyle's voice, and touches the tears running down their own faces as they watch, experiences an authenticity in that event that is simply irrepressible. They somehow experience it almost as if they really were there in London, in that auditorium, right behind Simon and the other judges. It is really that raw. I have spoken to more than a few people, and they all say the same thing: that it moved them in a way few things have in their lifetimes.

And as if that authenticity weren't enough on its own, the other phenomenon worth paying attention to is the remarkable community this event has created. Almost immediately in the auditorium as she began to sing, people rose to their feet as one and began to cheer her on. Fan mail is pouring in for her, and of course, there is the tiny matter of the millions of people who have watched it on the basis of the recommendation of friends and family. There's nothing to buy here or profit from, there's no national tragedy to pull people together or to exploit. There was just a single, clear, genuine voice that people really needed to hear, and needed to draw them together. Somehow, the truth of her voice spoke the cultural and secular equivalent of the word of life, a word to which millions of people are now testifying and sharing with one another, talking about it and crying together over it,

myself included! As virtual a community as it may be, as fleeting as it may be, a community was created nonetheless by the almost accidental speaking of this word of life. Pay attention, O church of Christ.

Jesus' disciples were not unaware of the power of their testimony, nor its purpose. Remember what John wrote about the purpose of their testimony: "We declare to you [these things] so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ." They recognized that the fearful and fledgling community created by Jesus' death and resurrection could become a meaningful and permanent and welcoming community if the events which inspired it could be kept freshly before the eyes, ears, and hands of those who needed to hear a word of life, those who needed to experience fellowship, those who needed the completion of their joy, just as Jesus Christ had fulfilled those needs in them. "We declare what we have seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us."

The word "fellowship" is a great word, even if it is a little old-fashioned. Actually, it is kind of ironic that it has come to be used so extensively to describe the church, since the roots of the word had a coarser beginning, describing a partnership of money. The Nordic roots of the word suggest an image of two people laying down their money on a table and shaking hands, now bound together by their business dealings, a relationship far more tenuous than the church ought to have among its members or than it has with its God. But be that as it may, the word

we have translated before us as “fellowship,” translates the powerful Greek word, *koinonia*, a word which is used to describe community, and so we know that we are dealing with the subject matter of relationships. Of course, the word community has as its primary sense a place or a defined group of people; the community of Guachipelin, or the expatriate community in Costa Rica, for example. It is only in its secondary sense that the word community is recognized as intimate relationship among people. It is a little awkward to say we are “in community” with one another, and so we are more inclined to say we are “in fellowship” with one another when we describe the bonds of spiritual friendship that John desires for those who would receive his letter.

We would be mistaken, however, if we understood this fellowship as one simply between people who had heard the same testimony about the word of life. In a way, it would be little more than the roots of the word really suggest: a relationship based on a common interest with a limited life span. Once our business ends, we each take our share of the money and go on our merry way. Even the case of the word “Fellowship” we may be most familiar with these days, “The Fellowship of the Ring,” has this sense. The fellowship of creatures in the books of Tolkein’s Middle Earth is drawn together for a purpose, and when that purpose is fulfilled, when the ring is destroyed, and the enemy defeated, the Fellowship dissolves. But John wants us to know that this fellowship is more enduring than that, that its ties are not dissolvable because they extend vertically as

well as horizontally, and that God doesn't let go as easily as we do. "Truly," John says, "truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." With this foundation, our relationship with God, and with one another, has been bestowed with an eternal character, and an inescapable bond. It is a bond hard to describe but not hard to experience, as the poet Francis Thompson put it in the opening stanza of his famous poem, "The Hound of Heaven":

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbéd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

Escazú Christian Fellowship. I am sure it was no accident that the word fellowship was chosen to describe the community of believers established here almost twenty-five years ago. Perhaps in the memories of those who were present those many years ago is a recollection of the scriptural basis for the choice of that word, and perhaps it was even this passage from First John. But even if it came from elsewhere in Scripture, it surely describes the same thing: a community that testifies to the word of life, a community that recognizes its fellowship is not

complete without that vertical dimension, and a community that shares itself that others may experience its joy. Surely it describes a community more enduring than the one launched by Susan Boyle's golden voice. Surely its collective face expresses even more joy than Simon Cowell's. Surely it pursues in love like the very Hound of Heaven. Surely its authenticity is an irresistible invitation to declare to the world "what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life." Surely, surely. Amen.