

Because we are worshiping with Crescent Springs next Sunday, this is our last foray into the book of Ephesians—at least for now. Including today we have spent 4 weeks in this book and have learned some interesting things: that it can be divided into two distinct parts, a theological statement and a practical part (theory and practice of being Christian, we could say.)

Last week we started in this epistle with instructions for how to live into our calling as Christians. The writer emphasized that once we come into Christ we are a part of the same body—we believe in the same Lord, we have the same hope, the same faith, and the same baptism. We believe in the one God, our creator or father or parent. This is true whether we are Jews or Gentiles—we all are one in Christ Jesus. We are set apart from the world and given gifts to use as disciples of Christ—to teach, to prophesy, to tell our faith stories, to preach, to care for others, to nurture the faith of others—and while this isn't a complete list, it is a fairly wide range of skills and abilities. We're not meant to have all of the gifts (although it might be possible to have more than one, I suppose) but we are meant to make the most of the gifts we do have. We are to use our gifts to equip others for ministry—in other words, if we have the gift of care, we not only *care* for others but we help others develop their gift for caring. Through this process of caring and helping others develop their caring gifts we strengthen the body of Christ and also allow the Spirit to grow within us—we are strengthened spiritually. We eventually come to spiritual maturity, if we work faithfully in the Spirit, and are more and more able to remain true to the faith. It is the writer's primary purpose in writing to strengthen the body of Christ who are part of the church in Ephesus (as well as any other worshipping communities who might read the letter.)

The lectionary then skips over some verses—from chapter 4 vs 17 through chapter 5 verse 15. Perhaps we find these verses in another year; but I want to glance over them in the context of what we've learned over the past 3 weeks.

For the writer of this epistle believing in Christ is the great gift that God has given to humanity. Or to put it another way, God's act of giving Christ to us is the greatest gift God could give us. Because of this gift, the writer says, the Ephesians aren't like Gentiles or even Jews outside of the Christian fellowship—though the Jews are in better shape because they at least have faith in the one God. To the Jews and the new Christian communities the Gentiles who don't yet believe seem to go from one belief to another—they live under a sort of “anything goes” mentality. In fact, they live in their *minds* which are easily distracted by darkness. As people come to faith in Christ, however, they put away their old selves, their old lives and live into a new life in Christ. The writer then gives a list of sorts of what Christian life needs to be without—lies, anger, theft, evil talk, bitterness, wrath, sloth, slander and so forth. What a Christian *should* be is tenderhearted, kind and forgiving. They are to live in love as Christ loved us—just as the new commandment given by Jesus Christ teaches his disciples to do.

Our passage for today comes in the middle of chapter 5. The writer began chapter 5 by being a bit more stern—a less gentle version of the “what not to do if you're a Christian” list—but as we approach our passage the tone becomes more positive. As followers of Christ they are now children of the light—so they should *live* as children of the light, bearing fruit that is good and right and true. They should try to please God in the way they live their lives, being *wise* rather than *unwise*. No one wants to be thought *unwise*, do we? And the idea of wisdom circles right back around to living as children of the light, bearing good, right and true fruit, using their gifts to not only build up their own spiritual muscles but the entire body of Christ.

We know what this means, don't we? We know what behaviors build up and what behaviors tear down. Making harsh judgments of others, especially others we don't know, who we see as outside of *our* fellowship or our tribe. Addicts, homeless folks, the mentally ill, poorly educated, can't find a job,

lazy—all kinds of people that become easy to label as “not one of us.” Harsh judgements of others tear down the body of Christ because they close off our ability to spiritually nourish these others. And they tear us down as well, on the inside, because that kind of judgment comes from a hard heart. And even though we may have the softest hearts in some circumstances, when we make judgements that separates us from others our hearts are hard.

This doesn't mean that we have to *condone* behavior that we believe is wrong; on the contrary, it is up to us to ‘speak the truth in love’ whenever it's necessary. But we must keep the emphasis on the *love* part, and make sure it is the truth that we're speaking. A truth that is universal, not merely our own perception. Because sometimes unless you really *know* someone you don't really *know* what they're dealing with. And until you do, until you've walked a mile in someone else's shoes, what you think you know may not be correct. So to keep the body strong and your own spiritual self strong by keeping your heart soft and kind.

Kind of different from what the world teaches, right?

I think it's interesting that the writer uses drunkenness here to illustrate *what not to do* as a Christian. I wonder if this writer knew about the story of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came but some of the crowd thought the people were drunk? And I think this passage has perhaps been used to demonize alcohol in general, which may or may not be a good thing. But if we look at the damage drinking to excess brings, we see that it also is something that tears down the body of Christ rather than building it up. Drinking to excess—especially if you do it on a regular basis—can ruin relationships, can cause us to say and do things we don't mean, can ruin us financially—all of which hurt the whole body of Christ. *Outsiders* looking in might be led to say, *why should I be a part of this group when they're no different than others?*

What we're to do instead of these and other behaviors that tear down the body rather than building it up? We are to worship. In worship we become reoriented toward the God who gives us life and offers us redemption; indeed, it is in worship that we are redeemed. The body of Christ, at worship together, each person worshipping from the center of their being--the heart—renews itself each time it meets. We worship as one, we sing praises to God as one; we are connected to one another by the shared experience of worship. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa calls this *ubuntu*. Quoted in *Feasting on the Word*, Tutu defines *ubuntu* in this way:

*It is to say “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.” We belong in a bundle of life. We say, “A person is a person through other persons.” It is not “I think, therefore I am.” It is rather: “I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.” A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, ... for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, ... or treated as if they were less than they are.*

Worship, then, brings out the qualities of *ubuntu* in us.

Finally in this passage the writer encourages the Ephesians to do something that I find difficult to understand and practice—give thanks to God at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. If we are to take this literally, I believe, it would be impossible. How do we give thanks for natural disasters that kill and destroy; for human beings who shoot up schools and shopping malls and movie theaters; laws that separate parents from children; illnesses that destroy bodies and minds? We all suffer every day in ways big and small; and yet, there it is in this letter to the Ephesians: give thanks to God at all times and for everything in the name of Jesus Christ (similar encouragements can be found in other epistles as well.) What do we do with this?

Perhaps it is that we should give thanks to God for our very being, for our existence, for the fact of the body of Christ that nurtures and supports us and surrounds us when we are suffering. Those of us who are in Christ, who are a part of the body of Christ can give thanks to God for the body of Christ always—as long as we are building up rather than tearing down. As we practice our spiritual gifts, using our gifts to encourage each other, to reach the outsiders and bring them in we grow in the *unbutu* that Desmond Tutu describes, we grow in our spiritual selves, and we strengthen the entire body of Christ.

And that is something I think we can give thanks for in all circumstances! Amen.