

Sermon March 22 Ephesians 5:8-14

Ephesians 5:1-7

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us ^[a] and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

³ But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints. ⁴ Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving. ⁵ Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. ⁷ Therefore do not be associated with them.

Ephesians 5:8-14

5:⁸ For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light- ⁹ for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.

¹⁰ Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.

¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

¹² For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³ but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴ for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Sermon

We're in the middle of Lent now. It's a time of looking at sometimes difficult topics – sin, repentance, trusting God as he calls us to changing circumstances, having faith in God in the midst of risk and fear, and a world that does not look to him first. That's what we've covered so far this Lent. These topics are all part of preparing ourselves to celebrate the cross and the resurrection.

I'm going to speak mainly from our epistle passage today – Ephesians 5:8-14. Follow in your own Bibles Paul in this passage urges us to live in the light, in all that is good and right and true, and not take part in the works of darkness from which we came. What is he speaking about here? In the earlier part of this passage before today's reading he spells out some of what works of darkness are: fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed,... obscene, silly, and vulgar talk, ...disobedience to God. Rather we are to find out what is pleasing to God. He says later in the passage 'understand what the will of the Lord is'. This is required to live in the light.

I am immediately reminded of the first letter from the apostle John which also refers to these ideas of light and darkness:

God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷ but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Francis spoke about sin in his first Lent sermon. I want to build on some of the issues he raised and then move to the positive side – how then are we to live. Francis spoke of how people in today's society think of sin primarily as anything that hurts someone else, whereas the Biblical idea of sin is falling short of God's glory. You can find that sermon on our website if you missed it. Paul in this letter to the Ephesians is saying that the opposite of living in sin is looking to please God. I'd like to explore why and how we do that today.

A lot of people look at Christianity and think 'pleasing God', being obedient to him, makes it about a whole lot of rules. Some of these might make sense – they involve not hurting each other. After all it isn't good to be a victim of murder or of stealing or deception such as lying – depending a bit on how you define these of course. But some of the rules seem more arbitrary. Why should we be concerned with some of the sort of things that the Bible considers impure or obscene if it doesn't hurt anyone else? Why keep a day of rest for the Lord? Why turn the other cheek? Why keep sex in marriage between husband and wife? And many more. Why would God want us to restrict our freedom and pleasure just because He says so?

I thought to begin by looking at where we are now – in the midst of this Corona virus crisis. The government here has taken all sorts of measures that change our lives at present, and we don't know how much more might be imposed on us. We are even being required legally to do things we would never think of accepting under normal circumstances. Our old way of life, our freedom, is severely restricted. But we know that the Government is requiring this for our good, for the good of the majority of the people in this country and especially the vulnerable. This depends on us all cooperating too. Most of us obey these rules because we trust that they are pragmatic. None of us is an expert with all the information at our fingertips. And even the experts are struggling to predict the future! We have to trust the government to some extent as having good intentions.

But what about God? Do we trust him to provide instructions for life? We could even pose the question: Who is God that he should tell us how to live? I hope it is obvious to us that God has more than just good intentions. After all we say that God is Love. What does that mean for us?

God created us – and he said that our creation was good. Primarily he made us to have relationship with him. Humankind made a mess of that so he made a way for us to get back into relationship with him. He started by calling a particular people to relate to him – to be HIS people. And he gave them the Law, his instructions for life. Some of these instructions were obviously practical – it even includes washing your hands – as those who have taken part in our Seder meals will recall. Others were just for distinguishing his people from those around them, like the particular offerings they made in worship. All of this was a gift from God to his people to enable them to respond to him, to relate to him and to be his children.

Then Jesus came, giving us teaching and illustrating in his life, death and resurrection, that the old Law was deepened and extended, fulfilled, to provide a whole way of life that we could live to please God. This is not just ethics but a way to walk in the light. It is God's gift to us that as he loves us with his self-giving love we can respond in self-giving love to him.

He knows us, he designed us and how we can best live. But that is not as machines but as human beings created fundamentally to love, particularly to love him. This also means loving all that he has made, including our fellow human beings who are at the pinnacle of his creation.

God made us as his gift to himself! He made us to be completely fulfilled in loving him. And the instructions he gives for living, those that are referred to by the Biblical authors, are a gift to us, to help us understand his will for us, how we can please him.

So let us try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord, realizing that it will set us apart from other people. They may question why we do some things that look like just rules for the sake of obeying religious rules. We need to be assured, and to be able to assure anyone who does ask, that we are so loved by God and so know he loves us that we want to respond in love by pleasing him, and living the way he designed human beings to best live. We want to be ever deepening that wonderful, beautiful, relationship of self-giving love which he has created us for.

Having left sin and darkness behind us, let us walk in the light, his light, and please him.