

August 8, 2021

“Living in Love”

Scripture Readings

Psalm 34:1-8

I will bless the Lord at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul makes its boast in the Lord;
let the humble hear and be glad.
O magnify the Lord with me,
and let us exalt his name together.
I sought the Lord, and he answered me,
and delivered me from all my fears.
Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed.
This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord,
and was saved from every trouble.
The angel of the Lord encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
O taste and see that the Lord is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.

Ephesians 4:25-5:1

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love.

Sermon

“Living in Love”

What Beautiful scriptures the lectionary gave to us this morning. They are both rich in imagery and wisdom. The first one is such a splendid Psalm of worship and comfort about taking refuge in God. The psalmist writes that angels camp with us when we fear God. A more accurate translation of fear is “to hold God in awe and reverence”.

When we stand in awe of God, taste and see God is good, angels make their home with us. I love that idea of having an angel make her home with me, watching over and protecting my family. And I could hear these words over and over again; “oh magnify the Lord with me, let us exalt God’s name together.” What does it look like for us to Magnify the Lord? What does magnify even mean? To make large, to make even bigger. Let’s leave that there for a minute and move on to the equally beautiful Ephesians text.

This too is a powerful scripture. Basically it is saying, “let’s all get along and here’s how.” Be imitators of Christ and live in love. These paragraphs are actually a great, how-to-guide for living in community whether in church or anywhere. I don’t think I have ever been a part of a Christian community that has evolved itself to be imitators of Christ as much as this one. I know it hasn’t been that way always but it is certainly how I have experienced you and I thank God for that everyday.

The passage also goes on to encourage us not to lie, or steal. It says that it’s okay to get angry but don’t act on that anger in a way that would do harm to others and talk out your anger before sundown so it doesn’t fester into a long term resentment and don’t talk badly about each other.

Good stuff, it isn’t easy for a group of people to come together, with differences and do what the writer of Ephesians asks. Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other for we are members of one another. We are connected through love. What hurts one of us hurts all of us. I read this paragraph and I’m loving it, thinking, “right on” but then I keep reading and stop dead in my tracks.

I always do that, I was taught to do that, to read the selected scripture in context with the whole chapter or letter it is in so I can try to understand the author’s intention.

So I turn the page and we go right into wives submit to your husbands, slaves to their masters, children to their parents. I can not ignore that. I can’t in good conscience romanticize parts of

the scriptures without saying, but look at this; thank God we don't believe this anymore. Thank God we have evolved beyond these scriptures. But how can we do this? How can we hold part as holy but not all of them?

Now a little background here, many scholars think that this letter is not written by Paul but rather at the end of the first century a few decades after Paul's death. At the time when this letter was written the city of Ephesus was a large commercial port city in Asia Minor (present day Turkey) it is a major trade route.

Additionally, the city was known as a center of pagan worship as the Temple of the Roman goddess Diana was located right out of the city limits. As such, people from across the region traveled to Ephesus to visit the Temple. Additionally, it was home to a large community of Jews who had a synagogue in the city. So this newly formed Christian community was created in a bustling, diverse, metropolitan city.

Paul had an established ministry in Ephesus. From Acts we know that Paul stopped off there, visited the synagogue in the city, and left the deaconesses Priscilla and Aquila in charge there before traveling on towards Jerusalem. When Paul returns he stays there quite a while with a lot of success. So much so that the blacksmiths who made idols for the goddess Diana saw their business decline and their economic way of life threatened.

Led by a silversmith named Demetrius, an angry crowd rioted and filled the theater that held 24,000 people shouting "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" Soon after the riot, Paul left Ephesus for fear of his life never to return.

So by the time we skip ahead to the writing of this letter this is what we know. There is much tension between the synagogue, temple and this band of gentile Christians that Paul established with the help of the two women leaders, Priscilla and Aquila.

Like many things in the bible, when we take them out of context they sound horrible but in context, they are actually an improvement, an evolution of the original rotten idea.

For instance Men had complete authority over women in the culture and were often abusive, thinking of their wives like they did their livestock and other property. At least in this letter, men are instructed to be loving and kind to their wives. Same goes with slaves, he instructs they are to be treated fairly, not abused and as to be treated as equals in Christ. A radical notion in the context of his culture but this is still not Jesus' original message of equality and love.

The author is trying to get this little band of radicals to fit in with the Ephesian community, to try and save their lives and not be outsiders. It did not take long for Jesus's message of love and equality to get watered down by this very process. Trying to fit in, trying to protect the community, trying not to make any waves.

So somebody who was a part of a church whose founders were women writes a letter that becomes the authority for the "Christian Household", instructing women and slaves to submit to their masters so they don't offend any of their neighbors? So they don't stand out with people saying, "oh they are that church that lets everybody in and treats everyone as equals."

So this may have been an improvement of the practices at the time in Ephesus but because of the way scripture has been treated as the infallible word of God for 2000 years these very ideas formed our culture as well.

Three paragraphs after this morning's beautiful, loving, message he writes "slaves submit to your masters". These very scriptures were used as legal arguments by the confederacy to argue that slavery was the intention of God. And still today in conservative households, the man is seen as the head of the household and wives are to submit to his will.

So what's my point? My point is-- we get to choose, we get to choose because God gave us good minds, free wills and strong hearts, we get to choose what part of the scriptures we listen to and what part we can minimize because they were scriptures that were important in that time and place but no longer reflect the vision of the Kingdom of God that Christ laid out for us.

We can minimize certain parts of the scriptures because they no longer reflect the vision of a loving God that we have come to know in our hearts and through each other. How do we do that? How do we trust our fallible selves to make those decisions? In my mind it is easy. We trust the Spirit to guide us and we ask ourselves what magnifies the Lord? What makes God's love and justice bigger in this world?

We refuse to chain our God to scriptures written in ancient times by people with their own notions of who God was but rather we believe in a living, still speaking God who is capable of speaking to us now in many different voices. We ask ourselves what imitates Jesus? What is loving and shows others that we live in love? Meaning what is kind, tenderhearted and forgiving?

When we feel ourselves trying to water down the message of inclusion in order to fit in, not be "that church" we ask ourselves, are we imitating Christ, are we magnifying the Lord?

There is so much tension in the world today, half the population wanting to hold onto how things supposedly used to be but I would rather be people who look to the future and ask ourselves, what does a world built on loving one another look like? I refuse to give up on that vision.

What if our laws are tenderhearted, what if we demand our politicians are to be kind? This was God's vision, to treat everyone as equal, to create a world where we love our neighbor and feed all God's sheep. For instance, would we have already fixed climate change if we actually held God in awe and reverence? For is not God's creation a part of God, does our Earth not magnify the Lord?

When we try to live in love, it changes us, it changes the way we see the world and it magnifies our faith, makes large our own hearts and capacity to love, to forgive and not live in judgment of one another. Living in love creates a place in our hearts and lives where angels can set up camp with us. May it be so for all of us. AMEN

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