

A Sermon on Ephesians 4:17-32

Last week's portion of Ephesians ended on such a beautiful, encouraging note! Listen again to its final sentences:

Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

In fact, from the first verse of Ephesians on Saint Paul shows us how God's plan before creation to redeem mankind led to Christ reconciling us to the Father on the cross; and how Christ then ascended to his glory, in order for the Spirit to descend and call and gather sinners into church. Paul has told us how the Spirit preserves us in the faith and builds us up together in love and peace. Ephesians so far has sounded like a lovely symphony of the Spirit, and last week's reading could be its final movement.

But for a number of reasons it could never be that. After hearing how Christ blesses his church with ministers of the Gospel, who enable all the members to grow up together in Christ; after hearing of the wondrous unity that we enjoy; after being urged to labor in the one Body of Christ to live in peace with each other.... We must also hear the other truth about ourselves.

Bear in mind that the chief audience Paul had in mind for this letter was the Gentiles, the heathen, who had come to faith in Christ. What they may not have yet realized he knew full well – how easy it would be for them to fall back. So he writes to the Christians of Ephesus that they must not let themselves be steered by their old useless thinking; they must not let darkness recapture their hearts and minds.

To do this Paul the former Pharisee uses the Ten Commandments – although you may not have recognized them in today's text, because he shrewdly refers to them in a Gentile way. Like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, Paul applies the Fifth Commandment to anger:

Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.

Before that he hits on how the pagans break the Sixth Commandment:

They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

And while the most obvious is his reference to the Seventh Commandment:

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work...

The one of which he speaks most is the Eighth Commandment:

Having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor,.. Let no corrupting talk come

out of your mouths... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you...

After Paul has spent all this time describing the new hope that Christ gave the world in his death and resurrection; the new birth in the Spirit that happens in us when the Holy Spirit bring us to faith; and the new life that his readers enjoy together in the Body of Christ, the Church... he knows full well just how present and active the sinful nature still is in these new Christians. This is why he must bring up the crimes and vices of their former lives.

From time to time a preacher of God's Word will get asked something like this: *Pastor, why do you have to talk about sin? Why don't you make your sermons more positive and uplifting?* It may even be phrased more theologically: *If we are no longer living under Law but under grace; if the man reborn in Christ has in him a living faith that like a tree produces good fruit, act of love, should we to leave the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament, where they belong. If the Law has, by showing us our sin, led us to Christ, is he not now our teacher as well as our Savior? No true Christian, reborn of the Spirit and recreated in the image of Christ, still needs the Ten Commandments."*

Martin Luther has a pet term that he uses so abundantly we might think he coined it: the "*old Adam*." But in truth, In fact, when Luther in one place is expounding the petition, "Thy will be done," he tells that the expression, *old Adam*," is simply his own way of echoing Paul's term "*the old man*," which he finds here in Ephesians and in Romans 6. What the ESV renders as "your former self," Luther translates more directly as *der alte Mensch*.

The point is this: It is clear apostolic teaching that, despite the regeneration of forgiveness and holiness that God has worked in us to make us Christian, in no way has the power of sin departed from us. And because this is so, even as we live under grace, in the freedom of Christ, the Ten Commandments can and must continue to render us their service of exposing our sin.

If you were to demand proof that this is true, you could in theory go to one of two places. First, you could follow each man or woman of Christ everywhere he or she goes, every hour of every day. Or, you could just watch Christians every time they gather, and listen to every conversation they have. Either way, what would you find? That there is no ugly behavior, no nasty vice – indeed, no crime – committed by mankind that Christians do not still commit. And you still would not have all the evidence available, for you cannot do what only God can do: he can and does read what is in our hearts.

But the most amazing thing is not the depths to which the members of his holy Church can still sink in our thoughts, in our speaking and our behavior. The most amazing thing is that God has not withdrawn his Holy Spirit from his Church or disowned us. In Immanuel congregation, in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, no matter how badly we have acted, no matter how severely we have suffered

the consequences of our persistent sin, the light of the Gospel has never left us completely. The Lord Jesus Christ remains among us as Lord of his Church. What you & I asked for in the confession of sins that we spoke when this service began, Christ performs mightily, generously, gladly.

I want each of you right now, therefore, to think of our congregation. Think of how we behave together as members of the body of Christ. Think of all the times we have not been loving or pure or humble. And hear again what we asked God earlier on in this service to do: *Forgive us, renew us, and lead us.*

For this is where Paul ends today's section of Ephesians. Since we are not a community whose members never fall into evil, seeing that we do quite regularly anger God, dishonor ourselves, and wound others, here is the last sentence of today's epistle:

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

The Word of the Cross is not only the Church's proclamation to the world. The Word of the Cross is not only the theme around which we arrange the articles of faith to catechize those new to the faith. The Word of the Cross is also to be the key signature of our behavior, and when it is so it takes the form of you and I forgiving each other, and then of being kind and tender-hearted as if that sin had never occurred.

What danger we live in: the sin of falling back into the ways habits of people who know not God or his Word. We call on him earnestly and often, therefore, not to desert us but to rebuke and convict with his holy Law, and always to pardon and heal with his promise of forgiveness in Christ. ☩