

Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, 16 making the most of the time, because the days are evil. 17 So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, 20 giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

THE SIREN SONG

Do you remember the Sirens of Greek mythology? Their enchanting songs lured ancient sailors into coming too close to the rocky shoal. And there they met their death. And of course today when we talk about the “siren song” we are talking about an appeal that is hard to resist but if heeded will lead to a very bad outcome.

That’s what today’s lesson is about, learning to resist the siren song of the world and instead follow the music of the Christian faith.

Our Scripture lesson was a letter written to the early church, in particular the church at Ephesus. We need to remember that the early church was very much a minority in the ancient world. Christians held radically different beliefs from their neighbors. And so in order to preserve their faith and their community, they had to be careful about how they lived. (3:15)

It’s hard to be different. There is always a great pressure to conform to the ways of the world instead of being transformed by the power of the Spirit. This was true for the Christians at Ephesus, and it is true for us as well. How can we be in the world but not of the world? How can we resist the siren song of the world?

CAREFUL LIVING

Paul tells us that resistance to the siren song of the world begins by an awareness of the importance of each day. He wrote, “Make the most of the time because the days are evil”. (3:16)

Each day has the potential for great good and for great harm. Each day we make important decisions that will forever change the course of our life. I would contend that there are no small decisions. Every day is a gift from God. As the Psalmist put it, “This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (Psalm 118:24)

Unfortunately, Christians often adopt the ways of the world instead of God’s ways because they just don’t think about what they are doing. We waste time on things that not important. We let opportunities for witness and service pass us by.

Instead of seeking God’s will for our life, we just “go with the flow.” Life becomes just one thing after another. And sometimes we are judged by our complacency.

Paul tells us to pay attention to our life.

What is God calling us to do today? How are we to be different from the world? What would a faithful Christian life look like in our particular community? This is not an oppressive way of life. This is life lived on tiptoe. This is life lived with a sense of Divine expectation and a willingness to wait upon God’s leading.

Many of us think that we are pursuing God and God’s will. But, I have found that we often substitute our plan for God’s plan. We do what we want to do and call it God’s will.

This is a very unwise way to live.

Whenever I feel dissatisfaction growing in my life, I find that the problem often lies with the fact that I am not waiting upon God’s guidance. Instead, I am charging ahead with my plans and assuming that God’s ways are my ways.

But, of course that is almost never true. And I often waste a lot of time with matters that are not all that important. Every life must have a balance between doing and reflecting, worship and service.

This is what Paul meant when he advised us to be careful. We need to trust the Lord and not rely upon our own understanding. (cf. Proverbs 3:5) This is the essence of wisdom. As the prophet Isaiah put it, “But they that wait

upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31)

When the prophet Isaiah wrote that long ago, God’s people had a lot to worry about. As Paul put it in his letter to the Ephesians, the days were evil. (Ephesians 5:16) They faced military defeat and exile.

There was nothing that they could do on their own to change the problems that they faced. But, the prophet reminded them that salvation would come from upon high. Though they had been unfaithful God would remain faithful. If they waited upon God, God would give them what they needed for the journey. God would restore their strength and hope.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians the days were also evil. Paul was a prisoner and would soon face execution. Some of the Christians in Ephesus may soon pay for their faith in blood as well. Reading between the lines we understand that the church in Ephesus was a church in turmoil. There was conflict between Jews and Gentiles. There was anger and serious disagreement in the church.

One commentator summarized their situation by saying this “forlorn little church” was “hanging on by its fingernails.”

What about today? Are the days evil? Some seem to think so. There are deep divisions in the world based upon race and religion and political philosophy. We face war and the greed of people who will say anything and do anything to get rich.

Things could be worse. But, we do not need to sugar coat the obvious fact. There is evil in our world today, and it is rampant. We too are hanging on by our fingernails, and this should make us all the more careful about how we live. When we are vulnerable, we are tempted to trust in something or someone other than God.

WINE

In our lesson for today, Paul next warns the Ephesians against excessive drinking. At first this seemed to be an ethical exhortation unrelated to what has come before. But, then it occurred to me that this is a specific example of how an unreflective lifestyle can lead to problems.

He wrote, “Do not get drunk with wine for that is debauchery.” Apparently alcoholism was a problem in the church at Ephesus, and of course this continues to be a big problem in modern society. We know that it is very bad to drink too much. It leads to a lack of self-control that is destructive in a number of ways. Families are torn apart. Crimes are committed and so forth.

But, the question that has always interested me is this: Why do we do it? What is it about alcohol that is so addictive? Why do we continue to drink too much even though we know that it can lead us to ruin.

There are many answers to that question. Some people drink too much in order to escape a life that is not satisfying. Some people drink too much because they have emotional problems. They are lonely or depressed and strong drink takes the edge off, for a while.

But, I would suggest that drinking too much is often just another example of careless living. We do not think about the things that lead to real joy and instead we substitute the joy we find in a bottle.

The best cure according to Paul is to live in a more careful fashion. We need to fill our lives with something more satisfying.

Do we really want to find our joy in a bottle? Or do we want to a joy that is deeper and longer lasting? Everyone needs to be filled with something. Paul suggests that instead of being filled with wine the Ephesians need to be filled with the Spirit.

FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

I’m reminded of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Do you remember what some in the crowd said about those disciples who first received the Spirit of God? They said they were drunk, that they were full of new wine.

Peter countered that argument by saying that it was only 9 AM and the bars weren’t open yet! But, why did the crowd think that those first disciples were intoxicated?

Maybe there's something about being filled with God's Spirit that is akin to intoxication. Maybe there's a joy that bubbles up in the lives of those who are filled with God's Spirit. An early Christian writer, Erasmus even referred to this being filled with the Spirit as "a pleasant kind of drunkenness."

In college I had some friends who had been addicted to drugs but became Christians and in the process kicked their dependence. They enrolled in the Christian college that I attended and were studying to be ministers.

They talked about how God had changed their life. They would say things like, "I'm high on Jesus now instead of drugs." And it was true. They no longer took life for granted. Their life had purpose and focus.

I think Paul is suggesting something like that in our passage for today. The Ephesians needed to be filled with the Spirit. The Spirit of God in Christ animated their life and filled them with joy, a joy that would last longer than any bottle of wine.

There is something intoxicating about true Christian worship, about being filled with the Spirit of God. Indeed I would suggest that ultimately this is what encourages us to live in a different way. When we experience life in the Spirit the old life loses its attraction. When we are filled with the Spirit there is no room for anything else.

JUST SAY NO?

I think we ministers often make a big mistake. We encourage people to just say "no" to sin. We list all the sins and their consequences. And in so doing we lay a heavy burden of guilt upon the people.

It sort of reminds me of how some of the sailors of Greek mythology attempted to avoid the dangers of the siren song.

Odysseus wanted to hear the siren song and yet not fall prey to their lure. So, he devised a plan. He had all his sailors plug their ears with beeswax and tie him to the mast. He ordered his men to leave him tightly tied to the mast no matter how much he would beg.

And so when Odysseus heard the beautiful but deadly song he ordered the sailors to untie him. But, instead they only bound him tighter. In this way he was able to hear the song and yet not succumb to the temptation.

And I think that much Christian preaching takes this approach to the problem of how we can be in the world and not of the world. Each week we tell our parishioners what they cannot do. We lash them to the bow of the ship and tighten the cords ever tighter each week.

Another approach is to try and take us out of the world all together. Like the sailors who stuffed wax in their ears we form Christian enclaves where never is heard a discouraging word.

Neither approach seems very helpful. If we are constantly harping on what we can't do and be Christianity becomes a very negative religion. More than that, sometimes all the talk about what we can't do has the opposite effect. People think that if we are preaching so hard against a certain sin, then it must be "fun" and worth trying! They want to hear the siren song for themselves.

We can't keep beeswax in our ears forever. Even the most isolated Christian community will have to interact with the world from time to time. And how can we witness to the world if we do not cultivate relationships with those who are different from us?

SINGING A BETTER SONG

I think we need a different model when it comes to being in the world but not of the world. And actually, there is another story about the Sirens from Greek mythology that provides a good example of how we can do it.

Jason and the Argonauts also had to sail past the dangerous isle of the Sirens. But, they didn't put beeswax in their ears or lash themselves to the bow of the ship. Instead, as they came close to the rocky island of the Sirens, they had their own suburb musician, Orpheus play an even more enticing song.

And so the crew did not listen to the Sirens and sailed past the island unharmed. Hearing a new and better song saved them.

I think this is the model that we should adopt. Christianity is singing a new and better song. Christianity is drowning out the siren song of the world with God's new song.

Notice that this is what Paul encourages the Ephesians to do. He wrote, "...sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts ..."

Now for those of you who are not musically inclined let me quickly add that no musical talent is required for this singing. Notice that Paul writes that this spiritual singing occurs in our hearts. It is a way of rehearsing the blessings of God and giving thanks in all circumstances.

When we worship and sing together it is a way of reinforcing the grace of God as revealed in Jesus. Worship, both as a community of faith and individually is important because it is a means of grace. Instead of filling ourselves with the buzz from a \$25 bottle of wine we fill ourselves with the Spirit as we sing "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." In other words worship is an intoxicating activity in which we enter the life of God through the Holy Spirit.

THE SONG OF THE CHURCH

Actually in the Greek text verses 18 through 21 are one very long sentence that describes the intoxicating worship of God. In that long sentence worship includes singing and making music to the Lord in our hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything, and being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Many modern translations render verse 21 as an imperative, "Be subject to one another ..."

This gives the impression that Paul is changing the discussion from worship to household relationships. Indeed this is why our lectionary passage stops at verse 20. It makes that same assumption.

But, this is a case where the older King James Version gives us a more literal and accurate translation. Submitting to one another is a part of our spiritual worship. Our life together is a kind of divine song that enables us to follow God's way instead of the world's way.

One commentator following this line of interpretation interprets verses 18-21 in this way,

“We are to be filled with the Spirit not through the intoxication of wine but the intoxication of worship, which involves the communal practice of singing to each other and to God, of singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, of making melody to the Lord, of giving thanks to God, and of submitting to one another.”

In other words, Paul is painting a picture of wives and husbands, fathers and children, and masters and slaves learning how to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Faithful household relationships are based upon worship. When we sing God’s song in church that song continues throughout the week. And that transforms our life.

To say it another way, singing is more than just making a joyful noise. Singing and worship are ways to overcome the siren song of the world.

The new song of God’s grace overcomes prejudice and discord. When we sing God’s song we become one body. When we sing God’s song we are intoxicated by the joy of God’s salvation instead of wine. When we sing God’s song we can give thanks in most difficult of circumstances.

A preacher told of a friend who had a terrible heart valve defect. He was told that he would surely die without a very risky operation. The man sought out a great surgeon and submitted himself to the operation, and the operation was a success.

A few years later the preacher and his formerly ill friend were in a very difficult situation. The dishonesty of some coworkers made it necessary for them to do a lot of extra work and sometimes work late at night. The preacher said that he noticed his friend didn’t seem to be in as much misery as he was so he asked why.

And the friend replied, “Well, when you have nearly died and have your life given back to you ... well, you tend to be grateful.”

Sometimes we forget how we got here. We forget why we come to worship on Sundays. We’re not here because we’re the best and the brightest. We’re

not here because we're the nicest people in town.

We're here because we have been saved by grace through faith. God has given us this life. It's God's gift and not our achievement. We don't have one reason to boast except for the grace of God in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

And this is what we all have in common, this song of hope called amazing grace. And when we sing that song together the siren songs of the world don't stand a chance of being heard.

Let us sing that new song of hope and grace each and every day.

Amen.