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Weekend of Sunday, August 15, 2021
12th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 20/Proper 15/Year B
First Reading: Proverbs 9:1-6
Second Reading: Ephesians 5:15-20
Gospel Reading: John 6:51-58
Sermon Title: “Instructions for the Disciple – Part 3”

Theme

True wisdom integrates our new reality in Christ with our Christian fellowship and daily conduct. Because we are filled with the Spirit, Christians regularly rejoice together, give thanks to God for one another, and care for one another. In this way we revere our Lord Jesus Christ.

Primary Text – Ephesians 5:15-20

¹⁵Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

John 6:15-58

Jesus said,] ⁵¹“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

⁵²The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; ⁵⁵for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

Sermon

(MAP) Ephesus was an ancient port city whose well-preserved ruins are in modern-day Turkey. The city was once considered the most important Greek city and the most important trading center in the Mediterranean region. Throughout history, Ephesus survived multiple attacks and changed hands many times between conquerors. It was also a hotbed of early Christian evangelism and remains an important archaeological site and Christian pilgrimage destination.

At the time of the writing of the Letter to the Ephesians, Ephesus and most of the known world was subject to the Roman Empire. But before the Romans, the Greeks were the ruling power, and because the Greeks were pagan people, the influence of those pagan religions continued to be a problem for the Ephesian converts to Christianity and we will notice that in the passages we have as the sermon text this week and next.

Greek mythology with its many gods developed to explain everything that happened in nature and the human world. If one wanted a particular thing, let's say, success in battle, then one prayed to, made a sacrifice to, and worshiped Athena, the goddess of warfare. There was a god for just about everything. This is just a list of a few that you might recognize:

- Zeus - the god of thunder
- Poseidon - the god of seas, storms, and earthquakes
- Hades - the god of the dead and the underworld
- Orpheus - the god of music
- Athena - the goddess of wisdom, handicraft, and warfare
- Aphrodite - the goddess of love, beauty, pleasure, passion, and procreation

These gods seemed to go through periods where devotion ebbed and flowed, and we might be able to understand that since one may seem to have the upper hand on the others, or be more powerful, or be more manipulate-able by the people. And that's what we all want, right? A god that can be coaxed and manipulated by our incantations or sacrifices to do our bidding at the expense of someone else's well-being. And if that god doesn't give us what we want we'll go to the next god down the street.

And for those of you who are more learned in mythology than me, each culture, it seems, had a differently named god for the same kinds of categories. By the 1st Century, the Romans were in power, and a syncretizing of the Greek gods with the Roman gods took place. So the Greek god, Zeus was replaced by the Roman god, Jupiter, both of whom it was thought ruled over thunder, lightning, and storms, for example.

The city of Ephesus was famous in its day for the nearby Temple of Artemis (completed around 550 BC), which has been designated one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Artemis was the Greek goddess of wild animals, the hunt, vegetation, chastity, and childbirth (which seems to be an unusual combination). Artemis was syncretized into the Roman goddess Diana, but there were other temples devoted to gods and goddesses in Ephesus as well.

This matters to us today because it was into this kind of culture that the author was trying to encourage Christian behavior over and against a culture of pagan behavior. In Greek mythology, the gods and goddesses were not necessarily *good* in the way we describe our God. Our God has been described by one word, love, (1 John 4:7-10) and every thought we have about God should begin and flow out of love, including the person of Jesus Christ.

I know I mentioned this during the series on Second Corinthians, but I want you to try to imagine how difficult it would be to try to pry a devotee away from this way of life to Christianity, which probably just seemed like another new religion come into town. This is what the author had to contend with when he began this passage by writing:

¹⁵Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

We can relate to this: the author admonished the Ephesians to "live, not as unwise people but as wise." We take a glimpse at ancient mythology and we wonder how anyone could believe that stuff. I suppose the modern atheist wonders the same thing about us – I will address this in my conclusion.

The author asked the Ephesians if they *really* want to worship a god that can be manipulated into doing what they want. Is that *really* a god, or a giant baby? On

the other hand, the god the author taught is a God revealed in Jesus Christ, whose character has not changed since Genesis, the first revelation of God. This God is love, and is willing to go to great lengths to win our devotion – even to the cross of Christ. This is the "will of the Lord" that he wrote of in verse 17:

¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the *will of the Lord* is.

Now, we know that these pagan gods never did exist; they were made up to explain phenomena in nature, and that led the ancients to want to manipulate those phenomena with their worship, incantations, and sacrifices. The one true God that the author is trying to lead the Ephesians to, is love and truth, and good and cannot be manipulated by the wants of people.

Therefore, as I said last weekend, we people need to understand our position in our relationship with God. God is our Heavenly Father and we are his children – and not the other way around. As people created with the gift of intellect, we may not like the order of that relationship and may rebel against it (we see this all the time in our culture – it's called crime) but that doesn't change our position. God is still God, and we are still God's children.

¹⁸Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery;

Some of the devotion to the gods and goddesses of the ancient world will shock you. The author was not simply writing good advice here. Maybe you've heard of the Roman god, Bacchus. Bacchus was primarily known as the god of agriculture and wine but was also associated with fertility, drama, and revelry. Bacchus devotion was expressed through drunken revelry and theatrical drama – and you thought the *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* was a new creation!

On the contrary, the author wrote that that kind of devotion is debauchery – a fancy word for excessive indulgence in sensual pleasures. The author wrote that that kind of behavior is beneath the Christian and he demanded a different, better, higher standard of behavior:

be filled with the Spirit ¹⁹as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts,

As a personal note, I love worship, and I *really* love *really* good worship. Worship at Zion is the best I've ever presided over. Joan on the keyboards. Stephanie directing our choirs. Many talented singers that can drag the rest of us along. Honestly, sometimes I get caught up in it – which is a surprise because, as you know, I am usually so cold-hearted and unemotional about such things. Excellence in worship ought to be one of the preeminent goals of every Christian church because excellent worship elevates the spirit of the worshiper, and that is what the author wrote can be the result of their worship.

But, as you can imagine, this is a hard sell. Years ago, in the little church up north, I hosted a New Year's Eve service. It was at like 5:00 PM. A handful of people came. After a couple of years, I gave it up. NBOM has a big New Year's Eve worship service that runs into New Year's Day. They've invited us. I declined on your behalf. Honestly, Martin Luther was all in favor of a little revelry.

The author concluded this passage by continuing this admonition by writing that we should be:

²⁰giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I'm always embarrassed when I ask members of the church if they pray at meals, or do devotions. I've learned not to ask the children because they will rat you out!

Do you know that Carol and I give thanks to God for the food and all the other blessings we have at every meal we share together? And our prayer doesn't stop there. We also give thanks and pray for you, our family, friends, and church family, for your health and safety as we plod along through the pandemic.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Let us be your example today. Choose the godly path. Heed the exhortation of the author of this passage. Pray to God our Father, bringing all your concerns to God. And give thanks at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And finally, I just have to say this. Some of you might be thinking that I wasted your time with all that talk about ancient mythology and pagan gods. "That was 2000 years ago! Nobody believes in god's like that today!"

- Drive by a golf course or a soccer field on Sunday morning.
- "Pastor, worship has to be over by noon, the Browns are playing."
- "Pastor, my child couldn't possibly make that confirmation retreat or youth event, he or she has to make practice or they won't be able to start the next game."

I know, all your kids are going to play professional sports or be in the Rockettes, but when those dreams don't pan out or end, what have you, their parents, given them to fill that void?

Don't fool yourself, our culture is full of idols, and they are just as fake and full of empty promises as the stone idols and mythological gods of the ancient world.

When they fail you, or your children, on what will you base your life?

I know, the atheists in our culture think we're nuts for worshiping an unseen God who died and rose again. But the God we worship revealed in Jesus Christ is real – historically real. He can be known and felt in real sensual ways. And a life of discipleship lived out through his creation, the church, is the source of unlimited fellowship, discipleship, and blessing. Let us not let this teaching pass us by without reconsidering our commitments.

Prayer

Ever-loving God, in the Gospel Reading for today, Jesus Christ our Lord claimed to be the living bread that came down from heaven. We can understand how difficult that must have sounded, it is still difficult for us to understand today. Give us faith to put our trust in him, and satisfy our hunger and quench our thirst for you. We pray this in his name. Amen