



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity Ephesians 4:17-32

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A couple of weeks ago we had dinner at Atlas Café and while we were there overheard an altercation between a couple and their waitress. They were angry with her because they weren't checking vaccines cards right. They were asking to see them and to see photo ID, but they weren't using the verification app to scan the cards. These people were very upset and were taking it out on the waitress. I felt bad for the waitress. Lots of people just doing their jobs are being unfairly hassled—whether it's because they check vaccines cards or they don't, because they require masks or they don't, you name it and someone's going to be unhappy about it these days—they're hassled because they're just following policy that their management has set, and much that to fulfil requirements set by the government. But it's the people up front who have little or nothing to do with policy that take the abuse. Maybe someone needs to be challenged about this or that policy, but to be effective those challenges need to be directed to the right people. We often expend a lot of effort in very ineffective ways. My wife often reminds me of this.

I mention this to illustrate the wrong way we often go about trying to address behaviour. In our Epistle St. Paul tells us not to act like Gentiles, not to lie, not to steal, not to be angry, not to let unwholesome talk come out of our mouths. He also talks about how we ought, instead, to be kind and loving and truthful with each other. And we all know that there are areas of our lives that need to change, that need to be more Christ-like. Where do we start? It's easy to try to address our behaviour, our actions first. How many times have

we tried to do that and failed? This is what Paul's getting at in today's lesson. Going after the behaviour is like going after the employee when what you really need to address is the management. In our case it's our sinful and muddled minds. We've got to address what's in our heads (and in our hearts) *first*. This is what Paul writes in Ephesians 4:17:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.

Just like us, the Christians in Ephesus manifested Jesus and the life of the Spirit, while still struggling to overcome the sins of their old lives before Jesus. Sanctification is a process, but that doesn't mean we should be complacent about it. And so Paul says, "You've got to stop walking, you've got to stop living the way the Gentiles do."

And we respond, "That's great, Paul, but I keep trying and it's a constant struggle. I don't seem to be getting anywhere." And Paul responds and he says, "That's because you're putting the cart before the horse. You're getting upset with the employees when the problem is the manager. You've got to address management. Fix that and the rest will sort itself out. And so Paul points to the real problem. The Gentile behave the way they do because their minds are set on futile things. The Greek word he uses for "futile" describes something that is empty or that has no value. When the Gentiles act the way they do, when they live sinful lifestyles, when they look to Caesar or to money or to reputation for security, when they worship false gods and are sold out to the flesh it's because these are the things on which their minds are fixed. He goes on in verses 18-19:

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

Paul writes very nearly the same description of fallen humanity in

Romans 1. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and chose to worship the creature rather than the Creator. They claim to be wise, but in reality they're fools with minds fixed on foolish and pointless things. And the result of rebelling against God with the mind is that one rebels against God in one's actions. We become callous, no longer driven by kindness and love and mercy. We give ourselves over to sensuality of any and every sort, seeking not the good of others, but to use others for our own selfish gain. We become greedy, no longer satisfied with what God has given, no longer trusting in his goodness to provide, but taking and thieving what he's given to others. We rebel against our holy God and end up in the muck—living in impurity. All because the *mind* has rejected God and as a result the heart has become hardened against him.

I can't help but think of Pharaoh. Through Joseph the Lord had blessed Egypt and saved them from starvation during the great famine, but as Exodus begins we're told that there was a new Pharaoh who didn't know Joseph, which meant he didn't know the Lord who had saved his people either. It's hard to imagine that Pharaoh was accidentally ignorant. He had to know where all these Hebrews had come from. No, he chose not to acknowledge the God of Israel. In his mind he rebelled against God. And as so often happens when we've believed a lie and are confronted by the truth, when Moses came to him as the Lord's messenger, saying "Let my people go!", Pharaoh's heart protected his mind from the truth. His heart hardened. And then the plagues came, revealing the power and authority of the God of Israel and the powerlessness of Pharaoh and his gods. But instead of accepting the truth, each time his heart hardened all the more. He rejected God and look at his actions: he was callous, he was greedy, he was willing to murder babies in order to protect his throne and his pretended divinity.

Without Jesus our minds are set on futile things and our hearts are hardened to throw up an emotional wall to protect our minds from confrontation by the truth of God. And this is why Jesus pours his Spirit into us. Jesus in his love cracks the wall, he starts knocking

bricks out, he climbs over the top and he gets our attention and the Holy Spirit goes to work. He renews our minds and he regenerates our hearts. And that's what Paul's getting at here. The Gentiles, the unbelievers, are still entrenched behind that wall and as Christians we've got no business still living like that. He writes in verses 20-24:

But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

He's telling the Ephesians—and he's telling you and me—that our minds shouldn't be stuck on futile things anymore, assuming that is, that we've been taught the truth about Jesus. No, our minds as Christians should be full of Jesus and his truth. Our minds should be full of the truth that in Jesus the divine Word of God humbled himself and took our flesh upon himself, that Jesus born of Mary died the death that we sinners deserve and that he rose again to unleash his life into the world. That he ascended to his Father to reign as King and that one day he will return when every enemy has been put under his feet. On that day he will judge the quick and the dead and we who have believed in him will be resurrected just as he was, we'll be given the life of the age to come—the life that Adam and Eve rejected when they first sinned and were driven from the presence of God and from his life. In the Lord's Supper we proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Those are three basic truths of that message we call the Good News. Jesus died for our sins. Jesus rose to give us life. Jesus will come back to resurrect his people and restore his fallen creation. Brothers and Sisters, somehow and on some level *everything* we do in life ought to be driven by this Good News, by these truths. The

knowledge that God's love for us is so great that while we were yet sinners he gave his Son to die for us ought to set our minds marveling at the incredible love of our God for us. Each time we think of Jesus and the Cross our minds ought to be driven to plumb the great depths of God's love. And the knowledge of the love of God demonstrated so profoundly in Jesus should naturally drive us to love him in return. The fact that Jesus has given us life and poured his Spirit into us as a down payment on the life of the age to come ought to motivate us to live that new life here and now. And the fact that Jesus is one day coming back to consummate his kingdom rule ought to give us a natural motivation to proclaim the good news that he is Lord in the hope that everyone we know might be prepared for that day.

Jesus has renewed our minds, Paul says, and not only that, but he's made us new. In places like Romans and Colossians Paul talks about having been buried with Jesus in our baptism and raised with him to new life. In Colossians he urges us, since in Jesus we're dead to the old way of life, he urges us to live the new life Jesus has given. These are all just alternative ways to describe the life of the Spirit who renews our minds and regenerates our hearts. The old self is dead and the Spirit has made us new. It's a foretaste of the resurrection that Jesus has promised. What happened to Jesus on Easter will one day happen to us and we'll be raised to the life of God, but in the meantime he's given his Spirit. And in the power of the Spirit we have a joyful responsibility to put off the old way of living and put on the new. We all know that it's not always easy. If it were easy Paul wouldn't have to tell us so many times and in so many ways that this is what we need to do. It's just that we're so used to the old way.

I was thinking this week that it's time to replace my shoes. I've got a new pair in the closet that I picked up on sale almost two years ago, because—well—shoes don't last forever. But they're not broken in. I put them on, took a few steps, and ended up putting my old,

worn-out shoes back on. They're more comfortable. I'm used to them. And just so with life. As unbelievers we cultivated sinful habits and ways of thinking. We let our hearts harden and build that wall to protect us from the truth. It takes time and effort to tear that wall down. We might now have our minds set on Jesus, but it takes time to retrain our actions to be in accord with that new truth. But change we must. Again, we can't keep walking like the Gentiles. We don't have the excuse of minds set on futility. Our minds have been confronted with the reality of Jesus, crucified, risen, and coming again. We need to be walking in the righteousness and holiness he gives.

In the rest of the chapter Paul goes on to describe what this looks like with specific examples.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

If our minds are set on Jesus who is the way, the *truth*, and the life, how can we let lies come from our mouths? Truth in the mind should manifest as truth in our speech.

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

Anger is natural. Paul doesn't say not to get angry. He says not to let anger lead to sin. Anger can be righteous. It motivates us to address wrongs and injustices and sin. But some anger, especially anger we let stew in our hearts gives opportunity for sin to take root. It leads to things like resentment, bitterness, enmity, and strife. These are the things that rob us of the joy we have in Christ and they undermine the love we're called to have for each other. They're the things that tear apart churches and that undermine our witness to the Good News of Jesus.

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he

may have something to share with anyone in need.

Stealing is wrong. That's a no-brainer. But Paul goes a step further. Being diligent in honest work and earning a living gives us the opportunity to share with and care for others. The world lies and tells us that it's every man for himself. Jesus reminds us that as he gave himself for us, we ought to give ourselves for others. The world also lies and tells us that work is bad, but when we go back to the beginning of the story in Genesis one of the things that hits us right between the eyes as truth is that God created us for work, it's our divine calling, it's how we serve God. In fact, working faithfully in service to him is how we bear his image. The problem is that our work has been spoiled by sin. We'll have to wait for Jesus' return before we'll see an end to fighting thistles and weeds with the sweat of our brows, but Jesus nevertheless gives us reason to be diligent in our work, doing everything as unto the Lord. In Jesus work becomes a means of worship.

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

If our minds have been renewed, there should be nothing corrupt coming out of our mouths. I know that's often hard, but instead, with minds full of grace, we should be using our mouths to bring that grace into the world in what we say and how we say it.

Finally, Paul writes in verse 30:

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

I think he's pretty well covered all of us here, but just in case you don't struggle with any of these sins, Paul's still got you covered: Don't grieve the Holy Spirit by how you live and act. That means that we need to live as people on whom God has placed his Spirit as a mark. I had a friend who said he wouldn't put a fish sticker on his car

because he knew he was an *offensive* driver and he didn't want to discredit Jesus or the Church. We think that a sticker on our car or maybe a cross hanging around our neck marks us out as God's people. They might, but what *really* marks us out is the Holy Spirit. Jesus has redeemed us and given us a promise of life in the age to come, but until that time comes, he's given us his Spirit to give us the ability to live that future life—or at least some real semblance of it—right now. The Holy Spirit takes God's future and pulls it into the present for us. The Holy Spirit gives us reason to trust in the promise of Jesus and because of that we have hope. Brothers and Sisters, that hope should shape everything about how we live today and it should be the first thing the world notices about us.

And so Paul can end saying:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.
(Ephesians 4:30-32)

We all know people who are bitter and angry. I remember counselling someone once who was overflowing with bitterness, but he said, "This is just who I am and I'm not going to change!" He thought that by being bitter he was being free and that I was trying to chain him up by telling him to stop being bitter, but in fact it was bitterness that had him in bondage. His mind was captive to futility and his bitterness was the evidence. But the Spirit frees us from that kind of bondage. The Spirit sets our minds on Jesus and the natural and free outflowing then ought to be an outpouring of Christ-likeness in our lives: things like love and kindness and grace. The fruit of the Spirit. And, Friends, in doing that we manifest Jesus and his kingdom, we manifest our hope to the world around us.

I think this is part of what St. Paul was getting at when he wrote to the Philippians, telling them to "work out their salvation". "Work out your

salvation" doesn't mean that we save ourselves through good works. What Paul's getting at is the practical outworking of the Spirit having renewed our minds. The Spirit has thrown out the filth, the lies, the rebellion so that we can think straight about the Lord Jesus and so that we can set our minds on the hope of the world and the age to come. Paul's given this list of dos and don'ts, but his point isn't to put us into some new kind of bondage. He's trying to show us the mind of Christ so that we are set free to really and truly live out the Good News. It's like learning the rules of spelling and grammar. Those rules aren't there to bind us up. They're there so that once we've learned them we can be free to speak and write and express ourselves. And so Paul shows us Jesus and he reminds us what Jesus has done for us and what his new world is going to be like and he turns us loose, and says: work out what the salvation Jesus has brought us looks like within the unique particulars of your life and personality and gifts. What does it look like to be faithful to Jesus and to live out the Christian hope *for you*. How can you in your life and vocation and with your unique gifts live and think as a day-dweller in the midst of a world still in the dark? Brothers and Sisters, this is what it means to have the mind of Christ. In Jesus the Spirit has set our minds on something worthwhile and of value. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. Now let that truth work out into your actions and in your day to day life. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as we acknowledge in the Collect, on our own can do nothing to please you. Our minds are set on sin and rebellion, but in our Baptism Jesus has plunged us into the Holy Spirit and changed everything. By your Spirit, Father, set our hearts and minds on Jesus that we might live our lives in ways pleasing to you, in ways that honour the Lord Jesus, and in ways that manifest his kingdom in the world around us. Through him we pray. Amen.