

August 11, 2024

Rev. Lisa Schrott

1 Kings 19:4-8 and Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Imitators of Christ

Our New Testament reading this morning is from the letter to the Ephesians. This letter has been attributed to the apostle Paul, although scholars suggest it was likely written by someone who had worked with Paul, rather than Paul himself. It is a letter rich with theology, addressed to the “saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus.” The letter opens with a cosmic depiction of God’s plan, which includes the faithful believers in Christ. Our text this morning comes from a section detailing the mission of the church, and importantly how the faithful are to live within a community of believers. As the notes in my study Bible describe, because of the profound response to the Gospel, the faithful are “experiencing a radical transformation of their personal and social identity; they are being resocialized into God’s purposes and family.”¹ So hear now these words from Ephesians, words meant to help individual believers of the Good News of the ministry of Jesus Christ find their place as a community of believers.

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, 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. Those who steal must give up stealing; rather, let them labor, doing good work 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 good 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. 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 walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

There were ten of us on the trip, nine of my seminary classmates and one faculty member who drove the 12-person minibus winding through the hollers and around the creeks of the Appalachian hills in Western North Carolina and Kentucky. We hailed from Vietnam, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Korea, and the U.S., spanning 25 years of age, a few married; one with children. We stayed in churches and settlement school dorms and two nights in a motel. For two and half weeks, we immersed ourselves in the lives of the people of Appalachia - people of faith as well as people who had long ago abandoned their roots in the churches that sustained

¹ Harold W. Attridge (General editor); The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians. *The Harper Collins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version*. HarperOne, 1989; p1982

their ancestors. This was a required seminary class called “Explorations.” The purpose of the course was to deepen one’s experience and understanding of the church and its ministry in a significantly different socio-cultural context.

A hopeful end result of the experience was that through social analysis, theological reflection, and a deepening of commitment to the Gospel there would be a new sense of being linked to Christians across social, cultural, and national barriers. Of course, that meant that the ten of us sojourners first needed to forge a sense of being linked as a community across our differences. We kind of knew each other before going - some better than others. We had taken some of our classes together, but hung out in different social circles. The course director warned us that the road would not always be smooth - that the bright and chipper morning people would annoy those who don’t speak before their morning coffee; that while singing the Old Crow Medicine Show song *Wagon Wheel* may be energizing around the campfire, some may want to poke their eyes out if they have to sing “Hey mama rock me” one more time. Not quite the state of despondency Elijah faced in the passage we heard Rebecca read from 1 Kings, yet none the less not 18 days of rainbows and unicorns.

And the course director Skip ensured us that if we relied on the power of the Holy Spirit, the grace of Jesus Christ and really took time to enjoy the beauty of God the creator, we would come out the other side transformed by love, with a deeper appreciation of the ways God was calling us into ministry in the world. He was right and we did – there were incredible highs and some deep lows; lots of laughs and some tears, powerful moments of drawing close to God and moments of discomfort. We shared these with each other as we did the Daily Examine throughout the week. And along the way we experienced the roller coaster cycling of forming, storming, norming, and performing.

Forming, storming, norming, and performing. I am guessing most, if not all of us, have experienced this process of group formation or group development in our lives. Maybe it was at camp; maybe it was serving on a committee; maybe it was joining a sport’s team. These stages were identified by psychologist Bruce Tuckman in the mid-1960s to describe the phases teams go through as they seek to work together for a common purpose. Tuckman’s work has been validated in a variety of task types, across cultures, ages and demographic variables. In the *forming* stage, there is an excitement about the task ahead, often mixed with a little anxiety about fitting in and expectations. In general, there are positive emotions about what lay ahead. In the *storming* phase, as the name suggests, as challenges arise in the task, frustration and anger can rise up, and conflicts ensue. The politeness and congeniality of the forming phase give way to more ugly behaviors. If not managed well, the divisions can interfere with the task at hand or even break apart the team. If managed well, the team moves into the *norming* phase, where individual expectations and behaviors become aligned. Team members trust each other enough to share their true feelings in healthy ways and take pleasure in the cohesiveness of the group. And in the *performing* stage, members come to appreciate their own and others strengths and weaknesses, relying on each other to increase

effectiveness. This phase is often accompanied by the sense that the team is "greater than the sum of its parts."²

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians understood this process a couple of millennia before Tuckman described it in the 1960's. The "saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus" to whom the letter is addressed had some type of spiritual formation experience. We don't know the details - maybe it was from one of Paul's missionary trips - or maybe another preacher. The author writes about how these believers have set their hope in Christ, hearing the word of truth in their salvation through grace; how they were individually marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit.³ It was an exhilarating experience - that mountain top - when they felt deep down in their souls that they were children of God. And when they realized that there were others in their community who had similar experiences - yes - we can form a beautiful community of the saints, working towards a common goal of sharing the good news of the Gospel. And then reality sets in and the *storming* begins. Their behaviors display the classic *storming* characteristics - frustration, anger, and division. They are returning to the behaviors they exhibited before they knew of Christ.

The author of Ephesians recognizes that this body of believers must be transformed in order for the community to survive - to get to the norming and performing stages. Just before our passage this morning, the author implores the faithful saints to leave their old life behind and embrace their new life in Christ, saying in Chapter 4:21-24, "For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus, to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

Put away your old self and embrace the new self, created in the image of God. The author is pretty blunt - speak truth to each other - but don't go to bed angry; engage in honest labor; provide for your neighbors; don't be ugly to each other; speak only what is useful for building up community; put away bitterness and anger; be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven us. Be imitators of God. Live in love - live as Christ has lived. I love that the author pulls no punches about how to get to the *performing* phase. There is normative behavior as a follower of Christ. Do these things - live this way.

This letter recognizes the inner transformation that occurred when the faithful received the gift of the Holy Spirit - when they felt the emotion of being a child of God, needed to be accompanied by an outer expression of behaviors – behaviors that differed not just in tenor and tone, but also in underlying motivation from those of their former, pre-transformed life.

² Judith Stein. Using the Stages of Team Development. *MIT Human Resources*. Online at <https://hr.mit.edu/learning-topics/teams/articles/stages-development>

³ Ephesians 1:11-14

During the past six weeks, we here at PCO have experimented with contemplative practices in our worship service. Rebecca and I asked you to try some new things and share some of yourself in the process. As I shared in the August Grapevine, I have been fed by the gifts you have shared. You have opened yourselves up and been vulnerable; shared your photos and your words, your memories and insights. You filled our Offering Tree with leaves of hopes, and prayers, and promises. And now that the tree has been moved to chapel for the time being and our chancel has been returned to its “normal” look, I want to take a moment to reflect on the experience.

The practices across the first five weeks were inner-focused. Last week Rebecca made a pivot to considering how “recognizing our own bodies moves us to acknowledge the bodies of others- moves us from contemplation to compassion and justice. This spiritual practice opens us to work for justice in the world by recognizing the ways bodies are overlooked, put down, discriminated against.”⁴ Over the next few weeks we will continue this movement – the work of taking our inner-transformed selves into the world to be agents of transformation for the greater society. This is an important part of our call, for our spiritual work is not for ourselves alone. As the words of preparation from author and psychologist James Finley challenge us, “There’s a certain temptation [as you go down the spiritual path] to say, “I’m out of here. I know it’s a troubled world, but I’m a mystic in the making. Don’t disturb me. See, I’m out of here.” There’s a temptation to think you’re finding your way into a realm of divinity or inner peace [or healing], removed from the brokenness and sadness of this world, which is really then to betray the path.”⁵

We betray the path of inner transformation when we fail to translate our new selves or our renewed selves or refreshed selves into people who seek that same transformation for others. We betray the path of inner transformation when we fail to move from the norming stage – the stage where we take pleasure in the cohesiveness of our team – the ones who are swimming in the same direction as us – when we fail to move to the *performing* stage, when we appreciate “that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” The whole – God’s cosmic vision for the collective of children created in the *imago dei* – the image of God – is greater than the sum of each of us alone. We betray the path when we fail to recognize that something transformative happens when we are in community.

We betray the path when we fail to be imitators of Christ. The author of the book of Ephesians recognized this in his words to the “saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus.” He called on the people who were experiencing a radical transformation of their personal and social identity because of their belief in the Good News of Jesus Christ to also be transformed into God’s family. To become imitators of Christ in their behaviors and their attitudes toward each other.

⁴ <https://www.okemospres.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Reflection-From-Beauty-to-Compassion-and-Justice-Aug-4-2024.pdf>

⁵ James Finley. *Not for Ourselves Alone*. Daily Meditation from the Center for Action and Contemplation, July 26, 2024. Online at <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/not-for-ourselves-alone/>

To not just believe that they are beloved children of God, but also to walk in love, as Christ loved us, so that all people know they are beloved children of God.

I was thinking about this last verse from our scripture this morning – Ephesians 5:2: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” during the Community Pride worship service yesterday morning. Beloved children of God from multiple worshipping communities, whose differences in theology and governance too often keep us separated joined together. And we joined together with beloved children of God who are not part of any formal worshipping community, yet open to the movement of the Spirit. We shared scripture together and heard poetry that stirred our souls; we lamented and confessed the pains the church has inflicted on the LGBTQ+ community; and we sang and we prayed and we laughed together -experiencing the joy and hope of community transformed by love and grace. I could not help thinking to myself how the author of the letter to the Ephesians must be smiling from above about the “saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus” who had heeded his words and became imitators of the Christ of who welcomed all to the table with open arms. *Join me in prayer.*