

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 8.8.21

**Ephesians 4:25-5:2**

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, 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. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly 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 useful 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, and 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 live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

**John 6:35, 41-51**

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 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." (434)

I've been ruminating a lot lately about how Christianity doesn't involve any specific practices. I think it's unlike other religions that way. There are no dietary laws specific to us—what we're to eat or not to eat, or on what days, or with whom. There are no laws about the body—whether we're to alter it anyway, as with circumcision or with sacred scarification, and when we might do that; or whether we're not to do that, as Jewish law prohibits tattooing. There's no law about how we're to style our bodies—whether to grow or cut our hair, whether men should or shouldn't have beards, whether to cover our heads, or whether women should cover their whole bodies, or to wear a prayer shawl. There's no rule about how we should arrange our living—neither our communities nor our households, neither as regards with whom we must live nor with whom we must not live. We have no sacred place to which we must make pilgrimage. We have no homeland in which we're to settle.

To be sure, these things have developed. Starting with the desert fathers and the monastic tradition, rules have developed—the Rule of St. Benedict, the Rule of St. Augustine. And there are conventions—the convention of Catholics not eating meat on Fridays, the convention of lower church Protestants shunning alcohol even for Communion and Mennonites disallowing dancing, the convention of much of the American church’s “focus on the family,” which is to say the heterosexual, procreative family living in single-family units of but two generations (parents and children), and eventually one generation (that empty nest, where the kids’ rooms have been turned into a home-gym and sewing room, respectively). And there are rules for clergy—that Roman Catholic priests must be men and cannot marry, that Orthodox priests can be married but must be men, that mainline Protestant pastors must be formally educated in accredited institutions. As for place and places, people will make pilgrimages to the “Holy Land,” and church buildings have certain conventions—the altar, the nave, the narthex. But none of these are native to Christianity itself.

And maybe that’s how it is in other religions—that practices aren’t native to them but grow up within them. I really don’t know.

I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately—like it’s news to me, though I’m sure it was pointed out to me in divinity school somehow, and long before divinity school. I’m a child of the church, of the congregational church. But I hear it anew, that the Resurrection of Jesus was this huge event, and it changed everything, but once that was absorbed as the new reality, people turned to one another and were like, “Now what?”

Aw-kward.

This is probably what was meant when people would argue whether Christianity is even a religion—or if it’s a sort of un-religion.

The final revelation, it was sometimes called as I remember from divinity school. God’s final word, that death is no more and that now life reigns, and the new creation is unfolding in our midst, and love is the binding force, and we’re a part of it somehow, though perhaps by no efforts of our own.

Said and done: now we’re to live into it.

How exactly...?

You know, the earliest Christians were often accused of being antinomian, which is to say living unanswerable to any sort of law—religious law, even moral law. I suppose some even behaved

as if antinomian, just doing whatever feels good at the time. It's hard to know what to do with yourself if no one's telling you, if no one's holding you to account.

Sensing this was the direction in which we were heading, some of the crowd even asked Jesus, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" It's as if they could tell well in advance that one implication of this so-called final revelation is that the works of God were going to be a lot less specific than they'd otherwise been.

And so it has come to be, that we're not really to *do* anything. According to the very founder of our faith, Jesus Christ, other than baptize people into this belief, and to break bread together as a rite of remembrance, nearly nothing else is spelled out here.

But even the breaking bread isn't a given. The three synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—remember Jesus to have instituted this as an activity of remembrance, which is to formalize and ritualize it in some way. Commanding this at the end of his life, at his so-called Last Supper, Jesus is thought to have instituted a sacred rite. But Jesus according to John proposes an even more commonplace thing. All this talk of bread, all this talk of Jesus being the bread of life: it doesn't come at the end of his life, and it doesn't come coupled with a sacred meal. It comes coupled with regular old meals in attending to regular old hunger, and it comes to us from the middle of his adult life and ministry, the middle of John's gospel, the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter, on just a regular old day. This is to say, according to the Gospel of John, there's no special sacrament for Jesus' followers to engage in. It's the sacrament of every meal, the sacrament of the everyday, that John's Jesus invites us into.

So, that's one less thing we're supposed to do.

Okay, one *fewer*.

You know, I realize right now I'm with that crowd from last week's reading: "What must we do to perform the works of God?"

We were then as now with the Gospel of John, this book whose main purpose is to get people to believe in Jesus. We were then as now in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John, this section whose central concern is Jesus as the bread of life. We're moving slowly through this 6<sup>th</sup> chapter, moving slowly through Jesus' talk of bread. Five weeks will have us hear him talk in these terms, five weeks of which we're in but week three.

Amidst that came the question. The people of the crowd had asked it of Jesus when they'd gone in search of him and finally found him in Capernaum across the Sea of Galilee. They were

people of the Law, let's remember. They were used to *doing* some very specific things to demarcate themselves as people of this God, doers of this God's Law.

Funny, then, that this Jesus didn't talk much about that sort of thing.

"What must we do to perform the works of God?"

Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

So, that's it. Our work is to believe, to believe in him whom God has sent.

And our lives are to flow from that belief, I guess?

Our lives *together* are to flow from that belief, I guess...?

Our work is to believe.

You know, this might be why one of the earliest endeavors of the early church was to establish what it was to believe.

This we discovered, somewhat painfully, those of us in the churches' book club.

We've been reading through Richard Burridge and Graham Gould's book *Jesus Now and Then*.

It's a title I love for its ambiguity: *Jesus Now and Then*. It might suggest a casual taking in of Jesus, something we do "now and then," from time to time, Or it might suggest a constancy, its persistence, something that has been done as now also then, which is to suggest all the time—for all time that is not now is then.

We just this week came to the chapter focused on the many councils of the first four centuries of the church. All the implications that come of the resurrection of Jesus, all these matters as regards Jesus' death and his life, his humanity and his divinity, Jesus' nature and substance and effect, which then calls into question the shape and nature of reality itself, the workings of the world and the beingness of human persons, like Jesus but also not like Jesus: the obsessional hammering out of right belief and the hair-splitting over where exactly right belief gets stretched into something straight up wrong: it rankled a lot of us in the book club, and annoyed. Why complicate something that's supposed to be so simple?

Just believe in Jesus, okay?

Okay...

But...

how do you do that if you haven't come to terms with "Jesus" or (while we're at it) come to terms with "belief," what exactly it is to believe. Is it a head-thing? Is it a heart-thing? Is it a gut-

thing? Is it a hands-thing? Hands to work, hearts to God? Or is it something done to us, in spite of us, done by grace, called forth and accomplished by God?

You know, there's perhaps nothing as complicated as the task of keeping things simple. Merely defining what we might mean by "simple" will itself become a complication of terminology, personality, aesthetics, expectations, and group dynamics. No wonder the Quakers encourage silence in the hope of keeping things simple. Sometimes that's the only way. But, you know, silence doesn't necessarily nurture relationship. It *can* thicken it; it can also thin it out.

I went to a conference on group dynamics once, nearly twenty years ago now. The conference wasn't *about* group dynamics so much as it was an opening up for a playing out of group dynamics—forty participants whose only task for those six days was to sit in the same room together for several hours a day and watch what happens. No one was in charge and nothing was to be accomplished but our simply being together. "Simply." Yeah, right. Soon enough, someone would open their mouth and say something, and then things got complicated. (Pro tip: don't be the first one to speak. For that, there's hell to pay.)

It's not an overstatement to say I've never felt so bruised in my whole life than when experiencing and then recovering from those weird, pointless, conflicted six days, when all we had was our relatedness, when all we had to work with and respond to were our responses to one another—this most fundamental thing, this most dangerous thing.

The thing is, the church isn't so far off from this conference. After all, we don't have much of a task—given that the bringing about of the new creation is ours to participate in but not ours to do, and neither would we all agree on how that might be accomplished, what that might even look like. ("Okay, you make the lion lie down with that lamb, and I'll get this cow and this bear graze together. And you, over there, keep that bush burning but unconsumed, and someone please get the justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream.") What's more, the one "in charge" is among us as but spirit, Jesus who yet lives and beckons and inspires but can hardly be called on to help straighten things out when things get confusing or conflicted except as a matter of inspiration and hope.

No wonder so much of the earliest extant writing about the church is letters regarding how those in congregations are to behave, are to treat one another, letters about our relatedness. Ephesians, from which we just heard, is one among these earliest texts. It might not have been written by Paul, the earliest known writer of this new way, following Christ. But its aim was similar to much of Paul's aim in writing. Really, it's almost embarrassing how focused such letters are on

the squabbles and misunderstandings that apparently were constant, then as now, occurring whenever people get together.

The writer of the commentary I read of this reading seemed just so embarrassed. Professor of New Testament Richard Carlson wrote: “If one first encounters [this reading] without considering its contextual moorings, its string of behavioral instructions can come across as an extended, alternating list enumerating the appropriate ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ Christians are called either to adopt or to avoid.” He writes this as if such things are unserious stuff compared to what you might expect to find in scripture.

But what’s more serious, and of high risk, than how we treat one another? What’s more essential to life in the world than basic do’s and don’t’s: “Put away falsehood. Speak the truth for we are members of one another.”

What’s more pressing and immediate than how we are toward one another? “Be angry, but don’t let the sun go down on your anger; don’t make room for the devil, for deep division, for divisiveness.”

Why should it be felt as a silly nagging, this: “Don’t talk trash about one another, but only what’s useful for building up, that words might be as grace. Put away bitterness; be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving.”

Really, why blush that these are central concerns, even disciplines—these which believing in Jesus the crucified one as Lord press upon us as the only way, the saving way? What’s more serious than whether we enact the reign of God in our midst, the reign of love and light? And for whom might such things be unconsciously accomplished? Don’t we all have to have decided to make this our way? Or am I uncommonly horrible? Am I only the one in constant need of a refresher course?

I remember when I first met Jesse, that he was going to be a psychodynamic psychotherapist, that he was training to be someone with whom patients would work intensely and over a long period of time to become more fully conscious of so much that operates of the unconscious. “It’s to make relationships better,” he summed it up to me.

“Seems extravagant,” I never said, but I imagine he could tell, “quite an outlay of expense in time and treasure for something that will be what it is.”

“What’s more important than relationships?” he asked once rhetorically. “If you’re going to invest big in anything in life, shouldn’t it be something as fundamental and essential as that?”

I married him, so I guess I was convinced.

But it's funny that it came to me from someone who'd had far less experience than I with congregational life—this life that is but relationship, this way of life that is but thick webs of relationship. I grew up in the congregational church. Jesse didn't.

The challenge for the church these days is that our being together isn't intended to produce anything. We'll have nothing to show for our efforts but fuller and deeper being together. In a time when productivity is the guiding principle, in a time when liking things, liking one another is the lead value for establishing and maintaining connection, being of like mind, being liked and liking (the highest value!), the church stands in weird defiance. We gather not to produce anything but a truer and more life-giving body. We gather with one another not because we like one another (though we well might!) but because in being together, in committing ourselves to one another, we believe there is life, even abundant life, true life, practice for when all becomes perfect, practice that indeed all might become perfect.

This challenge is even more present when it comes to our polity, our way of gathering and governing, congregationalism. This wherein we have no larger body to tell us what to do, no presbytery to determine our course, no bishopric to establish for us right belief or episcopate to manage our business. We of the United Church of Christ are even a non-credal church, meaning what creeds we establish as foundational for our up-building are ones we find within ourselves as flowing from our most fundamental work, our shared and discovered belief in Jesus.

So, the question before us is a hard one. It's also a joyful one: what do we want to do together? It could be anything, as long as its true purpose is love, love that is the unavoidable by-product of committing to be together come what may.

So, again, what do we want to do together?

We will worship, of course—sing and recite psalms, hear the word and interpret it, pray and play. Here is our refresher course, which I for one need, that we might be renewed in the spirit.

We could also then study the Bible, or read poems or other literature or books on social justice. We could volunteer at the food pantry, or gather goods to keep it stocked; or volunteer at the animal shelter, or gather back-to-school essentials for the children of our community. We could decorate the sanctuary or its grounds for worship and witness, a show of our commitment to something that endures, something true. We could keep it inviting, an opening up that others might come in to be surrounded by God's beauty and peace. Or we could pray for the sick in our care. We could go on a retreat or a on a hike or walk the labyrinth [in Lenox] to be complete in a few weeks.

There is no end to what we could do together—except the end of it all, which is perfect love, the point to which all is headed which we might practice starting now.

Yes, yes, the church should be something to be called upon in times of crisis. But the church should also be a web of relatedness that makes crisis less likely. Why wait until things get desperate before we realize the importance of our commitments?

Word is, people fighting for their lives against COVID are asking from their hospital beds for the vaccine. Their doctors and nurses and medical assistants have to tell them, “It’s too late for that.”

Let’s not wait ’til it’s too late. Let’s start our building up in love now.

Now.

So, what shall we do together?

Rest assured, whatever we choose, it has the power to save us all.

Thanks be to God.