

Sermon Title: "A Labor of Love"
Text: Ephesians 5:1-20

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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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There's a joke I love to tell about the new pastor who came to town. His first Sunday, the church was packed, and he just hit the sermon out of the park. The next Sunday the congregation gathered with great eagerness, but as the pastor got into the sermon, the folk in the pews started to wonder if it didn't sound familiar. By the end of the sermon, they realized he'd preached the exact same words as the week before. There was some talk, but they realized that with moving and adjusting to a new position he just might have been a little too busy to craft another gem. But when that same sermon was preached a third and a fourth week, the elders of the church decided they needed to have a talk. Taking the pastor to the side, they said, "That really is a terrific sermon, pastor, but we can't help but notice that it's the same one you've been preaching for the past month!" "It is, indeed," the pastor said, "And when I have any indication that it's begun to take root in your lives, I'll preach another!"

No, I'm not looking for an excuse to justify repeating myself. Actually, I got to thinking about that story this week because I wondered if the inverse might be true as well. I wondered, if I said *one* thing one week, and something *else* the next, would anyone notice? You know we've been making our way through the letter to the Ephesians this summer, and a couple of weeks ago we focused on the 4th chapter. The title of that sermon was "Not a Thinking, or a Doing, but a Being." They were perfectly respectable comments, and I hope they were faithful to the text. But as I read the words from the 5th chapter of Ephesians, which bring us together in worship this morning, I found myself confronted with what could easily be construed as a laundry list of things we all have to *do* if we're going to be good Christians.

"Be careful, then, how you live" could just as well be the title for a sermon from this chapter. And it's easy to see how such a sermon would wrap around this Labor Day weekend we're making our way through. With guidance directly from the New Testament, it would emphasize not what we need to think, or who we need to *be*, but the things we need to *do* if we are truly to be faithful to God's call. To tell you the truth, I'm quite certain that not a few sermons have been preached on that line from this text. "Fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed must not even be mentioned among you", and "Entirely out of place is obscene, silly or vulgar talk". Can't you see Harold Hill stirring up the crowds in River City? Or for that matter, some dour Calvinist preacher, set on removing any smile from the face of the faithful. Oh, we've got trouble, with a capital "T", and we've got to *do* something about it!

My problem with most of the sermons of this ilk that I've heard is that they tend to start *precisely* there in the text, with the list of behaviors that are found to be repugnant. There's a sort of national sermon being preached by some who self-consciously identify themselves as "The Christian Right" suggesting that fornication, and impurity lie at the heart of what they see equally clearly as the crumbling of our City on a Hill. Oddly, the notion that *greed* might indeed be a third partner in the accounting of sin is mostly soft-pedaled in those sermons. It's always seemed to me that if *sin* were the topic we want to tackle, it would be better to start with those that cut closest to the bone, rather than the ones that would leave me innocent.

But even that, I have to remind myself, is misguided, if what we're trying to do is stay faithful to the text we're given this morning—this *chapter* of Ephesians, in the *context* of all the other chapters we've read and will read. Because the words we read this morning *are* a part of the larger letter to the church in Ephesus, and central to that letter is exactly that the Christian life is not a tidy list of “do's” and “do not's” but rather a call to *be* that which we *are*, not by virtue of our own action or merit, but by God's free gift.

Remember, this is a baptismal message, and as we were reminded this morning, baptism is not the seal of a life lived in faith, but only its beginning. Yes, there are indeed things that we should do, and things we should work hard to refrain from doing, but it's not because such actions pave the road to our salvation. There are things we should do, and things we shouldn't do, as a *response* to the love God has shown to us in Christ. To put it to a fine point, faith in Jesus is not strictly speaking an “ethical religion” so much as it is an ethical response to a gift to which there is no adequate material reply.

So, for my money, the best place to begin our reflection on this text is not with the list of things we can't or shouldn't do, but with those first, truly awesome words that introduce the chapter. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” *Our* doing is a *being*, and it is a tall order, indeed: we are to be imitators of God, living in love as Christ loved us. As is often the case, the language can be a little hard to parse, as we tend to think of an “imitation” as somehow inferior to “the real thing,” but as the further language of the text suggests, what's meant by “imitation” in the text might better be translated, “reflection”—that which makes present what would otherwise be absent, or hidden. To imitate God, strictly speaking, would be idolatry. But to so shape our lives that they reflect God's glory is another matter altogether. We are to be, as we are able, the reflection, not of who we know God to be...that's not quite precise enough...we are to be the reflection of the God whom God's own self has revealed to us in Christ Jesus, and who *is* what God means when God says, “I love you!”

My mind went searching for a picture. You know that for about as long as I can remember I've been absolutely fascinated by human attempts to reach into the depths of outer space. It's slightly unfortunate, because while God gave me the fascination, it was not accompanied by the sort of mind that can make any real sense out of the science that has allowed it. But as I've put this notion of our true *being* into my heart, I've thought about the Hubble Telescope, which has allowed us to peek into the most distant corners of our universe, and even to look back in time to its beginning. One of the reasons it has worked so wonderfully, as I understand it, is that it has allowed us to look from a point in space that is not as bound by the gravitational and atmospheric forces of this planet, as are even the most advanced instruments on the ground. But still in all, if I understand it correctly, that telescope, like others, is in essence a couple of carefully ground lenses, set in a very precise relationship to each other, so that they can collect, and refract, all the light and energy they can.

Here's the thing I've been pondering this week. *Everything* that we have learned by virtue of that telescope was there long before it was put into orbit. The Hubble did nothing to *create* the world it reported. But through the hard work—including incredibly intricate repairs that had to be made once the telescope was put in place in space—of literally a generation of scientists, and

engineers, and technologists, it has allowed us to see with greater precision than could have even been imagined by the scientists and engineers and technologists who first proposed, the universe that was always there.

And I wonder if that's precisely what Ephesians suggests is *our* role in this world: to gather and reflect the light that shines in this world—to be the tool by which God's love comes into focus, not only for us, but maybe even more importantly, for all who *see* God's love *through* us. What's the problem with that scintillating list of “no-no's” –fornication, impurity, greed; obscene, silly, or vulgar talk? The problem is that such behavior takes what God has intended for the good of the world, and made it the object of our own gratification. And one of the things I *did* learn about those lenses that can help us to see clearly what is hidden from us is that if you turn them around, they will consume that which they were intended to illumine. Just like those lenses in those powerful telescopes must be ground and smoothed to work out any imperfections, a part of the Christian life must be attention to that which bends the immense and create love of God for this world to our own trivial pursuits. But we're in as much trouble if we make such a labor of purification and perfection our sole goal as if we casually accept and ignore the imperfections. Because such work is only a stage on the way toward our true *being*—the labor of Love.

The incredible claim we make is that when we break off some bread, and dip it into a cup, in the name of the God who called us together we *become* the body of Christ—the real, living, breathing way in which the boundless love of the Creator is brought into focus, seen, and understood in the world around us. It's not that our hearts are then made pure and reserved for some final day of judgment, but that in the light of the amazing love shown for us by God, through Christ, we are put in such a place that all our labors, and all our pursuits, can magnify that love, and radiate it into the world around us. And—here's the Labor Day connection—it's only when our labors are so aligned with God's purpose that all our doing fulfills our calling to *be*: when our *living* becomes the *loving* shown to us in Christ.

The wondrous thing is that in such a scheme there is no such thing as a trivial job. Because the way you flip a hamburger, or tuck the corner of a bed; the time you take to teach a child to read, or to add; the way in which you balance the corporate checkbook, or pour the concrete—every decision, every act in our lives can, and does potentially reflect God's love to someone, somewhere. Just holding the hand of a friend, or lifting a prayer for someone who has made your life more difficult, fulfills the purpose for which we were made: to give praise and glory to God. It's all, when done through the prism of God's most amazing gift, a labor of love.

“Sleeper, awake,” says God's Word, “Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you,” and in you, and through you, to illumine the world. So may all our labors give “thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Amen.