

August 18, 2024 Ephesians 5:15-20

A way forward. This is what the Scripture offers us. A way to be led by God today.

Our situation may be different from the situation of the church or churches that Paul was writing to from prison in our text this morning. The body of Christ that Paul knew well was a minority within society. Do we also understand ourselves to be a minority?

The little congregation meeting in homes in Ephesus spoke of God the Creator of all things come to earth as a man in Jesus Christ, within a massive complex of government buildings, temples and lucrative businesses devoted to the imperial reality of Rome backed by economic and religious power. Paul saw before him every day, all day, his own humble circumstances as a prisoner contrasted to his well-fed, confident gaolers, Roman soldiers representing the clout of Rome. Next week, we will read Paul's meditation on the military equipment of his guards. Paul was convinced that God was more powerful than an earthly kingdom and he prayed for himself and others the whole armor of God, bringing another dimension to his grim prison.

This morning, Paul is lining up a series of snappy sayings which would not be out of place on the bumper stickers or inspirational plaques that we humans use to try to focus our attention on what we know to be true.

Among the Romans and the many peoples conquered by Rome, the Jewish community was already a minority within the empire, and Christians were splintering off from that minority, seemingly disloyal. Of course, within the empire, Christians began as a Jewish community in Jerusalem. Jewish people gone up to Jerusalem from where they lived around the Mediterranean world for the Feast of Pentecost that year that Jesus was brought up from the dead and the Holy Spirit was sent to give freedom in witness, took the Gospel home with them in the language of the cities where they and their families lived.

Christians, as the community of faith opened up to Samaritans and non-Jewish soldiers like Cornelius, to merchants and craftspeople and servants and slaves and government officials and nobles and well-to-do matrons of society, were still a tiny minority. Within the religions of the empire, Jewish identity was among recognized religious communities. People were expected to acknowledge the political and religious power of that had conquered them. That was just common sense, but the Jewish people and now the Christian sect, would not bow their head to images of the Roman gods and emperors. This was disruptive to society and government and the Christians were considered rogue elements. Paul was thinking of that negative evaluation.

Paul writes in the first chapters of Ephesians of the big picture, the power and purposes of God for the world and for the church in general. From chapter four, Paul addresses individual and community life within the church. From 4:17, Paul intensely charges those who believe in Jesus to be different in their way of life from everyone else. Don't try to fit in and fly under the radar. Paul tells them to wake up and accept that they are different. Act differently, embrace your identity, but not in a disruptive way.

It seems that people of lower economic and social positions were taking the Gospel of liberation to heart. It seems that a few women of higher class were delighted to hear that in Christ there is no male or female, and declining to stay at home and be quiet as society demanded. It seems that people without honor or standing in society were taking the message of Christ seriously and believed themselves to be free of family and sexual guidelines.

Paul is cuing up guidelines for living to admonish the Christian minority to behave in a way that would not bring shame to the name of Christ. "You're free in Christ, but you need to focus on holy living, not wild living."

When you were a child, were you ever the only family of your kind in society? The only one who moved in recently, the only Christian, the only Moslem, the only Black person, the only Asian person, the only Hispanic family on the block? Parents usually say, now don't embarrass us, behave correctly, don't bring shame on the family. This is Paul in our passage this morning. Not just don't embarrass us with drunken behavior, but, even more, keep your focus on God's presence with us. When people think of Christians, let them think of the songs they hear coming out of the homes where Christians met. Let them think of the amazing attitude of thanksgiving that these pitiful sectarians have.

These slogans for living are still useful for us. We are easily distracted by all sorts of situations and needs and hungers and shiny things, and pithy quotes help us focus! Paul exhorts believers to be different, to be holy in their lives. What we read this morning should be a description of our lives and of our worship together.

Can we also be challenged from this text to remember what it is to be a minority, not to be dominant as a community of faith? How can we neither try to be just like everyone else and fit in with society nor attempt to stand out because we are not bound by humdrum social rules? How can we live in the reality of God's presence, with orderliness and the Spirit of God, with thanksgiving and song?

(Ephesians 5:15-20)