

Living a New Life - Part Two

[Ephesians 5:3-20](#)

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, November 19, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

We have been looking at the Book of Ephesians for the last several weeks. The Book of Ephesians is about a call to stop living lives that are full of darkness and to live life that is full of light in Jesus Christ. Let us pray now for God's spirit to move us as we hear the Word that is spoken to us about the good news of Jesus:

Help us now, Gracious God, to dig deep into your good and powerful presence. Help us to see Jesus in the midst of even the darkest places, our troubles, and our suffering. Help us to receive the power of your Spirit, and not only to listen to your Word, but put your Word into practice even in song and action of life. Move us now in the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This past Thursday evening, I had the privilege to sing with Mike Denham and Chuck Petty. We were singing as a part of an event of NPC's Fund for Charitable Giving, and hopefully encouraging people to give rather than discourage them! As one of our songs we chose a ditty from Gilbert and Sullivan called, "The Dickey Bird and the Owl" --not a very spiritual song. And as it happens, later that night, the song kept appearing in my dreams. This simple phrase kept haunting me: "A dickey bird sat on an apple tree bough and warbled by night and day." It was warbling most of the night for me. When I was got up the next morning, that song still haunting me, my wife turned to me and she said, "I couldn't get that silly song out of head; it haunted me all night." And that's the way it is with songs that are easily singable: we learn the tunes and the words just stick with us.

Now, this morning, like some of you, I'm sure, I awoke at six o'clock, and I simply did not want to get up. I found myself thinking it surely would be nice to doze here for a while longer, and I just began to doze. Suddenly, the scripture passage that we read this morning hit me at the core, in addition to this hymn that Paul quotes, "Awake, sleeper! Arise from the dead and Christ will shine upon you." You see, scripture will come through to us if we put it together with our singing and our experience, and God will remind us even in the dark moments of the love and presence of Jesus Christ.

Last night as I was listening to Prairie Home Companion with Garrison Keillor, when he made a very strong but pithy statement that summarized the whole program: "Thanksgiving is about adversity. Thanksgiving is about what it means for us to live in the midst of dark times, difficult times, and still find the light of Jesus Christ in the midst of them. It is not deep thanksgiving unless the thanksgiving emerges out of pain."

You remember that the Apostle Paul in Ephesians addresses himself as a "prisoner of the Lord." He reframes his experience of being in prison at the hands of the Roman government, saying, "No, I'm here because Jesus put me here." And in that context, being in the context of Jesus the Christ, he was able to celebrate prison because Jesus had him there for a purpose. He never stopped giving thanks for people in the midst of the dark places because his ability and freedom to give thanks for others gave him the ability and freedom to be sustained in the midst of his own struggle, and this is the way it is. The purpose of Thanksgiving is to keep calling us outside of our own pain and to call us into the presence of light; to say no matter how bad life gets and how dark the world can be, the light of Jesus Christ is still greater than that and that light is with you here and now. We need constant reminder of that.

Paul fights his confinement--the darkness, the loneliness, the isolation. He fights it with songs, with letters and visitors, with prayer and with memories of the good experiences of Jesus. Thanksgiving only carries deep and profound value in the face of poverty, of dying and death. Profound thanksgiving is a banquet of gladness and joy and light while we are being served grief or simmered in pain, stirred in frustration, seasoned in sadness, diced in difficulty, covered in captivity, cooked in controversy, spooned

in spitefulness, deep-fried in doubt, and mashed in malevolence. We eat in the midst of darkness. Now that sounds like the meal that I want to attend. But we are there and able to eat with joy because Jesus Christ is present, not because we deny the reality of the trouble or the pain.

This is best exemplified in the Apostle Paul's own life. He only preached what he practiced. For in Acts 16, we see the powerful example of Paul and Silas in a Philippian jail. They had frustrated the merchants of Philippi who then threw them into jail. The authorities had stripped them down and beaten them with rods -- they were on the edge of death. They threw Paul and Silas in the innermost security of the prison, in the center cell, the darkest place; and, as if to say, you're not getting out of here, they throw bonds around their ankles to make sure they weren't moving. At midnight when they were probably in tremendous pain, Paul and Silas started singing, and the prisoners began to listen. How can this be? These men were beaten to within an inch of their lives. What were they singing? You can almost feel the reaction of the prisoners as they listen to Paul and Silas give thanks to God and praise Jesus Christ for the privilege of suffering at the hands of the merchants.

There is a sudden earthquake, all the doors open, and all the shackles fall off the prisoners, as if to say "You can leave whenever you like." But it is an amazing thing that happened.

The real miracle is not that they had all the doors open, but that everyone stayed in the prison. Why? I think they were absolutely captivated to see two men who were enduring tremendous pain and suffering innocently, who were willing to stay in prison -- the prisoners were so compelled by the wonder of this thanksgiving that they decided to stay with them.

Better to stay here in the presence of these wonderful men of light than to go out in the darkness and wonder what will happen. That's a powerful statement that Paul experienced himself in relationship to the wonder of singing in the middle of the darkness. Sing hymns and songs and psalms in the dark. And he uses an example of the hymn that was probably sung many times by him and others: "Sleeper, awake, rise from the dead and Christ will shine upon you." "Be filled with the spirit," Paul says, "as you sing."

Sing when you are with others; sing when you are alone, when you make melody in your own heart. And as you sing, you expose the light even when there is total darkness around you. Giving thanks is the bright light shining of Jesus Christ in the midst of the hardest place, for how can one sing when it seems like life is totally bleak.

I have a friend who had been diagnosed with something of concern in her brain, and she needed to have a test. The frightening thing for her was not so much what might be diagnosed in her brain but what would happen for her in the test itself. For, you see, as some of you know, she had to be put into one of those big machines in a tube and sent into the machine in the middle of a very confined space in darkness, and she was terribly, terribly frightened. As she was telling me this story, I became anxious with her, because I had my own claustrophobia issues.

"I was panicked about having this test," she said, "in some ways I'd rather just not know and die of an aneurysm of the brain. But it came to me. I realized that if I memorized some hymns and I knew the hymns well that I often enjoy singing, that if I went into that dark place, I could sing those hymns and maybe the Lord would be with me enough that I wouldn't panic." So she memorized several hymns, and when the day came, she was put into that tube and she began to sing. She sang for 45 minutes while they did the test, one hymn after another. And the anxiety never came. Out of that experience of her thanksgiving and the singing that happened was a tremendous sense of thanksgiving for the fact that God had intervened in Jesus Christ, and she was not alone. Now that's real experience of the presence of God in the midst of darkness.

Sometimes in the midst of the darkness of the world, we take on some of the darkness in our own spirits, particularly around the giving of money or the use of money. Sometimes we use as a smokescreen, "Well, I'm being a good steward, so I'm not going to give very much. After all, you need to make do with what little I'm going to give. You don't deserve more than I'm going to give you at this time. You're not getting any more until you do what I want you to do. I'm cutting you off because I'm really angry."

The perspective is that money is to be used as tightness, narrowness, vindictiveness, and hostility, a way to get back at people or institutions that we don't like--a kind of spiritual larceny that goes on in our own view of reality. Sometimes we Christians are more tight about our money than we are about anything else.

Another pastor and I were having lunch together in a Bethlehem restaurant not too far from First Presbyterian Church, and, as we were having lunch, one of the waitresses came by, and we thanked her for her great service. She said, "I appreciate your saying that." And we said, "We think we'll give you a bigger tip today because we want to recognize that." She said, "I am dumbfounded." We asked her why, and she said, "Well, aren't you all from that First Presbyterian Church down the street?" And we said, "Yes." She said, "Oh, we talk about you all the time; you are some of the cheapest people we've ever met." As I was telling that story, I walked out today and one of our own members, who was a waitress in another restaurant said, "That's why I never serve Sunday after church because the Christians are notoriously cheap."

Well, that ought to register something for us. We ought to reflect and say, "Exactly why are we so stingy and tight, particularly with people who serve us? Almost with a sense of self-righteousness, we only give money the old-fashioned way, to people who deserve it." We sometimes allow darkness to creep into our souls and to abandon generosity of spirit, and people know it and see it in us when we are coming.

You can tell the difference between people who are passing in front of you who carry light with them and those who pass before you and darkness leaves a shadow wherever they go. Refuse to participate in the darkness, this text says. In fact, expose those acts of darkness in your own souls. And how do we expose them? One pattern of exposing the darkness is to give thanks in the midst of the darkness. To give thanks is to say, this darkness will not prevail; to sing in the midst of the darkness, to declare that this trouble will not overcome me--I will sing of the glory of God in the midst of this trouble. To be light in the darkness, to be wise among the foolish, to be substantial among the superficial, to do good amidst the evil, to speak truth among the deceptive, to show love among the vindictive, to bring peace to the fearful, and be encouraged among the complaining. Those are the kind of people we want to be with.

The world is often a thankless place. Paul says clearly, "Change it. Be people of the light; let the light pour through you to these tough places, and do not let the darkness overcome the light." The text is clear here as it leads to the connection between thanksgiving and giving. An open heart that is full of thanks becomes a generous heart. A blessed person becomes a person who blesses others. A willing spirit becomes a generous hand.

In this little pamphlet that we sent out to our membership last week from John Stott, he said, "Christian giving promotes a thanksgiving to God." There is an intimate connection between giving and thanksgiving. If you are thankful, you'll be generous; if you are generous, you are reflecting your spirit of thanksgiving. An authentic Christian, Stott says, "in their giving leads people not only to thank us, the givers, but also to thank God and to see our gift to them in light of his indescribable grace shown supremely in the gift of his son Jesus."

To be filled with the spirit is given action here, action of being thankful and singing and action of giving generously. With the power of the spirit, practice these spiritual disciplines of singing and community, making melody in your hearts, and giving thanks to God our Father in all things at all times, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I encourage you to consider ways that you will practice your singing. You say, "Well, I can't carry a tune." But you can still recite the poetry. As often in the recitation of the poetry, the meter of the poetry carries its own sense of melody. I call your attention to the possibility of purchasing the organ tapes that Bill Neil has produced for Easter and Christmas, in the middle of producing two more, the best of all the rest of the hymns, not because I want to sell his CDs, but because I want to encourage us to learn the hymns, to know the words of the hymns and to sing the hymns particularly when life is the toughest. Sing along!

I mentioned John Glendenning, a member of our church who died recently. John was a tremendous light as he walked through the sanctuary, as he walked through the narthex. Whenever John was around, there was a sense of hope and brightness, even in his nineties. And he would often say to me, "Oh, I'm here, I'm

so thankful for this church. I'm so glad to be here. I'm blessed by God. I wish I could become more generous. I wish I could just give everything away." He pretty nearly did at the end. Generosity is a reflection of thankfulness, and thankfulness is a discipline that we practice in the midst of the toughest times.

This past summer I was privileged to go to a high school graduation of a young woman of 19. She was pushed across the stage area of the graduation in a wheelchair because she has cerebral palsy, not able to talk, not able to walk, not able to control her arms or her legs, but a very bright young woman, mentally very perceptive, a good listener with good comprehension skills, able to do all the work up through high school because of a special auditory scanner to help her learn.

This young woman was born prematurely; only a pound and a half at birth, and the doctor said she'd never live through the night. She had a brain hemorrhage that worsened the situation. And nineteen years later, I was able to be at her graduation to hear one person after another, including her own parents, wonder at the magnificence of her grace and her generous spirit as a person who has grown up with 52 surgeries and barely able to live each day--and there was tremendous joy, and people paid attention to that. Because of her faith and her presence, the entire high school class realized that Jesus is powerfully present in her and her family.

So it is that we are called to be a church of thankful and generous people, even in the worst times, especially in the most difficult places.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, some of us here today feel in captivity, caught in our fears and our angers, our frustrations, our anxieties, and we do not know how to get out. It causes us to become tight and narrow. We ask that you would teach us the disciplines of giving thanks and of singing according to your Scripture and of offering your prayers when we are in the toughest spots. Surround us with people who can pray for us when we cannot pray for ourselves. And move us as a church to be known as a place of grace and light in a city that is all too often known for its darkness. We pray this in the powerful name of Jesus Christ. Fill us with your spirit and move us to do your work of light in this world. Amen.