

Text: Ephesians 4: 25- 5:2  
Title: To be Light and Hope

Date: August 16-

So last week Tony and I switched pulpits- I told him that I would be really Presbyterian and that he should be really UCC here- that way our people would be happy that they didn't get stuck with the other guy. From there it was just a hop skip and a jump to threatening him that I'd talk about predestination. We had a lot of fun- but then it occurred to me that we Presbyterians don't talk about Predestination much...

Most of the time, when we say predestination- what we mean is double predestination- the notion that before the beginning of time God decided who was going to get into heaven. This is a classic example of "ask the wrong question- get the wrong answer." Our experience is that we are presented with the promises of the Gospel and that we are given the faith to respond to those promises. In a very real way we experience being chosen. But we still witness people doing evil things- so we extrapolate that if we are chosen, they must not be chosen- see the problem here? As a general rule, extrapolating out based solely on our own experience doesn't always take us where we want to go.

Things really spiral out of control by the time the Westminster Confession of Faith was written in 1646. Its backdrop was the English Civil War -which pitted largely Anglican Royalists against largely Presbyterian & Puritan supporters of Parliament. In the days before separation of church and state it was felt that any government had to have a theological statement explain that God was really on their side. So Parliament convened the Westminster Assembly and staffed it with a variety of Anglican and Presbyterian clergy. As so often happens in civil wars- it is just this side of impossible not to fall into an US vs. Them mentality. So double predestination becomes the ultimate Us vs. Them- We are chosen by God to go to Heaven and you all are going to hell! Us vs Them is the question that predestination is the answer for- but that is not the question that Scripture asks.

Our Ephesians passage demonstrates the biblical question- What is the nature of the Christian Community? Is it a voluntary association or are we called by God to worship and serve together? And for what purpose has God called his people?

The underlying theological question is all about membership in the church. If I say that God has chosen me and empowered me to respond in faith to the promises of the Gospel, then that put the responsibility for maintaining the relationship on God's shoulders. Of course the temptation there is to treat the Gospel as the ultimate get out of Jail free card and keep on living a life that does not reflect Jesus' teachings. But if I say that I choose God, then the responsibility for maintaining the relationship stays on my shoulders and it is possible that I could, by my failing to live a Christian life, be kicked out of the Kingdom- our Baptist friends call it backsliding. See the tension?

The way Paul tends to use predestination was calm fears of being rejected because we still sin. The flip side of the gospel of grace is that God will always forgive and restore us- we don't have to worry about crossing some invisible line and alienating God once and for all.

The question that our Ephesians passage seeks to answer is, "What is the nature and purpose of the Christian community?" Ephesians assumes that spiritual conversion results in individual moral renewal- so that is not the issue our passage addresses. No, the imagery our author is reaching back for is the **chosen people of God**. What did God charge the Jews to do? Be light and hope in a world of darkness and despair. What does that look like?

What it doesn't look like is an insular, isolated and self righteous community where one has to be doctrinally pure enough to join. There has always been a tremendous temptation within the Christian community to look inward, to define ourselves over and against one another. It was not too long ago we assumed that for us to be right, the other guy had to be wrong. If nothing else, the ecumenical movement pushed us off that dime- now we say that Christianity is a 31 flavors + type of proposition, and that God calls each of us to the congregation that needs our gifts for ministry. So denominations no longer have to compete with one another; which frees us to actually cooperate with each other.

So what is the nature and purpose of the Christian Community? First and foremost, it serves as community; the environment in which we experience the Christian life. There is nothing earth shatteringly unfamiliar here- this is so familiar it is almost boring. We come individually to faith. Some are raised in the church, some other may come into the church later in life, but every single one of us has been invited by name by the Lord God of the Universe. Together we celebrate the sacraments, the milestones in each other's lives and together we learn more, do more and grow more. This is just life in the church- and we take it for granted.

But it isn't just granted, for life in the church requires acts of our own will- for in community every action affects everyone else. Ephesians lays this theme out in verse 25: *So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another*. One of the functions of the church is to tell the truth to one another, in everything from doctrine to personal actions. For the trajectory of our words and actions affects the community as a whole.

For instance, we are told to get angry- but do not sin. Ephesians assumes that life in community generates friction; that sooner or later we are going to rub each other the wrong way. That's no big deal- but how we handle those times is. Will we speak the truth together in love and seek to build each other up? Or do we go to war? I honestly to God hope that none of you have ever witnessed a church fight- for they are awful. Things may start with a minor disagreement (do we pave the parking lot or do we hire a youth director?) but when disagreement leads to factions, than winning takes precedence over making the decision. Those who oppose us (and of course we are on the right side, right?) don't merely disagree with us; they disagree with God and all that is right in the church. When that happens, not only is it important that I win, it is important that you are punished. Ephesians isn't kidding when he talks about making room for the Devil and making sure that what comes out of your mouth isn't something that you are going to regret later.

At first glance, the whole bit about thieves is a bit weird- who is he writing to? A congregation of bank robbers? 2 Thessalonians give us a hint when Paul scolds those who are abusing community charity. The issue here is not theft per se, but not pulling one's weight in the common ministry of the church. Most organizations operate on the

golden rule- he who has the gold makes the rules. But in church we have folks all over the economic map, from those just starting out to those living off retirement income. Together we engage in ministry, each contributing what we can. That is why we tend to talk in terms of Time, Talents and Treasure during stewardship campaigns- for everyone has a stake in the ministry of the church to be light and hope in a dark world.

And we live in a dark world. The other week we had yet another example of what happens when the message of light and hope doesn't get through. What'sname walks into a gym and starts shooting. Like the Unabomber and the guy who shot up Virginia tech a few years back, this guy turns out to be alienated, isolated, hater of people. What set him apart was that he documented his thinking online- so being a curious guy I read some of the blogs. He goes off on the pastor of the church he had been a member of for a dozen + years. I wondered how anyone could be involved in a church and still hate to the point of killing strangers. So I looked at the church's website. Here's the opening paragraph of their mission statement,

***Tetelestai Church exists for the purpose of the dissemination of the accurate, dispensationally-specific teaching of Bible doctrine with the confident assurance that the results of this will be the magnification of Christ and the glorification of God the father the edification of the Church which is Christ's body, and the advancing of the faith of the Gospel to those who are without God in this world and without hope***

When a church falls into the trap of defining itself over and against others- we often wind up with something like this- defining their mission as being doctrinally pure. While we cannot hold this church responsible for the rampage it is legitimate to point out that a focus on external doctrinal purity often leads to self righteousness and that self righteousness does not lend itself to building community. There is a world of difference between knowing what we believe and experiencing that together and saying that if you do not measure up you are not welcome here. In this case that message had tragic consequences.

That is why Ephesians mimics Paul's stance on predestination by pointing out that we are already sealed. We still sin, we still fall short; but the Holy Spirit is not going to unseal us and kick us out of the kingdom. Like the other members of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is grieved when we sin- so let's spare him the grief. After all, who wouldn't want to be in a community where we experience people being kind to one another;

being tenderhearted with one another and cutting each other some slack? When we follow the urging to imitators of Christ- this is the result.

I teased Tony about preaching about predestination. But it is true that when we focus on who is in and who is out, the effects are always tragic. When I see that my inclusion in the church is a gift of grace, then I can assume your inclusion is a gift of grace as well. We are then free to be gifts of grace to each other and to the people God has given us to love and serve in God's name. To assume that those who do evil are fated to be that way by God is to deny them the same grace that God so freely bestows upon us- and if that isn't breaking faith, than I don't know what is. To those outside the church are those we are called to be light and hope- we will get out of the Holy Spirit's way for the rest. Let us stand and sing #421 The Church of Christ in Every Age and reaffirm our commitment to be used by God for the purposes of God