

LEAD A LIFE WORTHY OF YOUR CALLING

(08/15/17)

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 4:1-32

“I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

As we turn our attention to the 4th chapter of this letter, I would like to pick up where we left off last week. For the past few weeks we have been examining Paul’s choice of words, particularly his choice of prepositions, and how they shape the meaning of a passage. For example, when Paul talks about *being in* Christ Jesus, this is very different from *believing in* Christ Jesus.

When we have the experience of *being in* Christ Jesus, being one with Christ Jesus, there is no distance. We are where Jesus is. This is what I understand as being in the kingdom of God. If we are where Jesus is, our thoughts, feelings, speech, and actions will be congruent with what Jesus would think, feel, say and do in a certain situation.

This is different from the matter of beliefs. Beliefs are a product of cognition. I may believe that Jesus was the Son of God. I may believe that Jesus walked on water, that he healed people who were afflicted with various diseases, and that he arose from the dead. These beliefs may accord with reality or not. My beliefs, however, may have little impact on my thoughts, feelings, speech, and actions.

I like the distinction that was made by John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church. Wesley said that we are not saved by a belief or any system of beliefs, no matter how true these beliefs may be. Since Paul tells us we are saved by faith, this implies that faith is not the same as belief, though we sometimes use these terms interchangeably.

I don’t recall what Wesley said about faith, but it doesn’t matter because I have my own definition. I believe that faith is the quality of our relationship with God. If we are saved by anything, it is not by holding an orthodox belief system. If we are saved, if we are healed and made whole, it is through the quality of our relationship with God. As Christians, we are saved, healed, made whole through the quality of our relationship with God as we experience God in and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I think we know this is true. A few weeks ago I mentioned the man who killed his girlfriend and then turned his gun on himself. In his blog the man maintained that he

did not fear divine retribution for committing both homicide and suicide. He was certain that because he believed in God and Christ, when he died he would go to heaven. He was sure that what he did in this life was of no consequence, since, as he had learned in church, we are not saved by good works but by our belief in God and Jesus.

If you recall, I used this horrendous example of evil to make the point that one can *believe in* God without having a *relationship with* God. One can *believe in* Jesus; one can even believe that Jesus is the Christ, without *being in* Christ Jesus. If this man were *in* Christ Jesus, he could not have done what he did.

Last week we explored the difference between Paul being imprisoned *for* being a Christian, for being a *follower of* Christ, and his assertion that he *is* a prisoner *of* Christ. If you are a prisoner *of* Christ, Christ will guide your thoughts, feelings, speech and actions. You will be yoked to Christ. At the beginning of every communion service we recall how Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will have rest for your soul.” This implies that if we are yoked to Jesus we will become gentle and lowly in heart, and we will find peace in our soul.

Note how Paul begins Chapter 4 of this letter. Paul says, “I, therefore, *the prisoner in the Lord*, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” Paul describes himself as a prisoner *in* the Lord. I think this is what it means to have faith. If we have faith, if we experience a quality of relationship with God through Christ, this faith will give rise to good works; it will find expression in a beautiful life.

Paul tells us what kind of life will flow from the experience of dwelling within Christ Jesus or from having Christ Jesus dwell within our heart. He says that we will lead a life marked by humility, gentleness, and patience. We will bear with one another in love. We will reach out to those in need. This is the kind of life to which we are called.

The primary focus of our reflection this morning, however, comes from the next phrase in the first line of the 4th chapter. Paul *begs* the members of the Christian church in Ephesus, his parishioners, to “live a life worthy of their calling.” Since, as we have already noted, this letter may have been written to the entire Christian church, not just to the Ephesians, and since we are a part of the Christian church, Paul is writing this to us. He begs us to “live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.”

In addressing this letter to “the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus,” Paul calls his parishioners, and us, to be saints. He then tells us how we can “live a life worthy of our calling.” All we have to do is be faithful in Christ Jesus, to be faithful, to be filled with faith. This is a matter of *being* rather than *doing*. We simply need to *be in* Christ Jesus. This, of course, is easier said than done. But this is why we are here this morning. We come to experience the presence of Christ both within and among us that, as the theologian Paul Tillich puts it, we might become “transparent to God.”

I like this phrase: “transparent to God.” Jesus was transparent to God. When people looked at Jesus, they saw through Jesus to God. They saw God, or at least what God looks like in human form. Paul tells us that if we are *in Christ Jesus*, we, too, will be transparent to God. When people see us, they will see through us to God, or at least they will see what a human life looks like when it is “filled with the fullness of God.”

Paul not only calls us, he *begs* us to “live a life worthy of the calling to which we are called.” He *begs* us! He reminds us that we are called to be Christians, to be followers of Jesus. In the context of this letter, to be a Christian means to “become a prisoner of Christ,” to “dwell within Christ,” to “let Christ dwell within our heart.” To be a disciple is to engage in the spiritual disciplines that make this possible, that make it possible for us to be in the kingdom of God. This, then, will give rise to what Paul calls “the good works for which we are created.”

Of course it is true that our life, our values *are* shaped by our beliefs. However, they are shaped even more deeply by our faith. Mahatma Gandhi once said that Christianity is a wonderful religion. He had the deepest respect for the teachings of Jesus. Gandhi then said something very interesting. He said that you should be able to tell a Christian from a non-Christian by the way that person lives his/her life.

Of course he is correct. A religion isn’t worth very much if it doesn’t make a noticeable difference in the way we live our life. It should make a difference in our values. It should make a difference in the way we feel toward others. It should make a difference in our ability to forgive those who have hurt us. It should make a difference in the way we deal with tragedy and the way we face our death.

If someone were to get to know you, would they know you were a Christian? I am, of course, not talking about whether you wear a cross around your neck or even go to church on Sunday. If someone were to look at you, would they see through you to God?

A Gallup or Harris poll that was taken last year during the presidential campaign spoke to this issue. The poll addressed a person's attitude toward torture.

The question that was asked in the poll was something like this: "If you had a terrorist or enemy combatant in your custody, and if you suspected that the person had information that could be helpful in identifying other terrorists and help prevent a future attack on Americans, would you torture the person to obtain that information?"

The positions taken by the candidates and also the responses to the poll were interesting. The responses do, indeed, distinguish Christians from non-Christians but probably not in the way you think. According to the poll, 66% of people who described themselves as evangelical Christians condoned the use of torture. Of those who described themselves as mainline or liberal Christians, only 52% condoned the use of torture. Only 40% of people who described themselves as having no particular religious orientation or affiliation said they would condone the use of torture.

This hits a little closer to home than the man who killed his girlfriend and then himself, for he appears to have been theologically confused as well as mentally ill. The participants in this poll were normal everyday people like us. The results of the poll indicate that the more people describe themselves as devout Christians, the more likely they are to condone the use of torture to obtain information from a prisoner of war.

Forget the matter of whether information gained through the use of torture is of any value, which it apparently isn't. The terrorist or enemy combatant is in our custody. We are safe; the person cannot hurt us. According to the Geneva Convention, we cannot torture this person. We wouldn't want an enemy to torture our soldiers if they were captured. If we don't want our enemies to do that to our soldiers, we should not do it to theirs.

But that isn't the point. What puzzles me is the number of people who declare themselves Christian who condone the use of torture. I wonder what it means to them to be Christian. How could you be "in Christ" and torture another human being? How could you torture another human being if Christ dwelled in your heart and if you realized

that Christ is also within that person, that Christ is present even in “the least of these?” How could you be a “prisoner of Christ,” be yoked to Christ, and torture someone?

I don't care if your belief system is orthodox or even if what you believe is true. I don't see how your *faith*, the quality of your relationship with God, would allow you to torture one of God's children. If you were to talk with Jesus about it, as Brother Lawrence suggested in the spiritual discipline that is known as “the practice of the presence of God,” do you think Jesus would tell you to go ahead and torture the prisoner?

As a Christian minister, I found the result of this poll disturbing. It implies that the less Christian you are or declare yourself to be, the more congruent your response would be with what Jesus would want you to do. Why would the non-Christians be more “Christian,” more Christ-like than the Christians? It makes me wonder what we are doing and not doing, what we are teaching and not teaching in the church. It also makes we wonder what people have in mind when they think of themselves as Christian, describe themselves as Christian, or declare themselves to be Christian on a survey.

Anyone can “talk the talk.” Anyone can think of him/herself or describe him/herself as a Christian. Paul challenges us to “walk the walk.” He challenges us to walk the walk of a Christian, to walk the walk of Jesus, to walk the walk that Jesus walked if indeed we are the Christians we claim to be. He then asks us this one simple question, though it is a question that is both challenging and disturbing.

Are we living a life worthy of the special calling to which we are called?

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
October 15, 2017*