

Text: Ephesians 5: 8-21
Title: Singing into the Light
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Earlier this week a grand jury released its report on sexual abuse in six dioceses of the Catholic Church in Pennsylvania. It opens with this line: “We, the members of this grand jury, need you to hear this....”

What follows is

900 pages detailing the abuse of over
1000 identifiable victims by over
300 priests over
70 years.

The report is dark and damning. It details unspeakable acts of depravity and cruelty. It reveals a culture of collusion, cover-up, and systemic inability and unwillingness to protect the youngest and the weakest while protecting, and in some cases promoting “predator priests.”

These stories have trickled out for decades. Victims have found voice in Australia to Chile, Ireland to Tanzania. Historians will tell you that the church has always been corrupt and that this is just the tip of the iceberg. And while the Catholic Church has done great good, and been faithful and charitable in many ways, it is hard not to be gutted, staggered, and enraged. To quote Kathleen Sprows Cummings, a professor at Notre Dame:

We need to rip off the tablecloth, hurl the china against a wall and replace the crystal with something less ostentatious, more resilient and, for the love of God, safer for children....

People will say that there is still holiness in the church, that there are many priests and bishops with good and pure hearts, and they are right. But there are times when the sin is so pervasive and corrosive that it is irresponsible to talk about anything else, and this is one of those times.

And, before climbing up on our moral high horse, we are well served to be attentive to the darkness in protestant/evangelical churches.

Earlier this month the senior preaching staff and board of Elders at Willow Creek stepped down because of a leadership culture that looked away and swept away decades of allegations of inappropriate conduct by Bill Hybels. They did this even as news surfaced that Willow Creek paid out better than 3 million dollars to the families of two developmentally disabled boys who were abused by a church volunteer.

Why would any thoughtful person hitch their wagon to the church of Christ given this kind of behavior? We can't even shine a full light on the behavior of these priests and pastors because it is too wretched for our listening children. Outside of anger and lament I don't know what to say. It is too dark.

It is too damning.

Lord, have mercy.

But I am stuck with this calling....

Paul writes to the Ephesians about darkness. He sets up a contrast.

You were once in darkness, but now you are in light.

You once wandered in the dark, but now you are children of light.

You were at one time separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship, without hope and without God, but now in Christ you are the very dwelling in which God dwells in his Spirit. Therefore, bring the deeds of darkness into the light.

Darkness and light.

The deeds of darkness and the dwelling of God.

When it is pitch dark inside the church it is harder to make sense of the contrast that Paul sets up.

So, let's sit with this for a while.

It is helpful to remember that this letter swings on "therefore." The first three chapters declare the grace of God in Christ. The last three chapters are the "therefore."

Therefore, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

The first half announces that we are reconciled with God, not by anything that we have done but by what God has done in Christ. The second half details what life lived in response to that reality looks like. And, in our text this morning that life is defined by wisdom.

Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, don't be foolish...

What follows, sort of lost in translation, is a series of dependent phrases.

What does it mean to live as the wise and not as the foolish?

Don't get drunk, but be filled by the Spirit,
speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs,
singing and making music,
giving thanks to God for all things,
submitting to one another.

Those phrases are all linked to one another: speaking, singing, giving thanks, and submitting.

A fine and faithful member of Hope Church recently asked me to preach a sermon series on "spiritual disciplines." Over a burrito he said that people need practical tools for living a life in Christ. I asked what he envisioned. He said, "Pick a discipline like prayer and then preach on a passage about prayer. Pick a passage about fasting and then preach about fasting. Could you pass the hot sauce?"

In some ways what Paul offers here are spiritual disciplines.

These are the practices that embody wisdom.

These are the disciplines of living in the light.

This is part of understanding "what the Lord's will is."

That's a helpful rubric. These are the practices that help us live into the wisdom and will of God. How do we live in response to God's grace in Christ?

By speaking to one another,
by singing,
by giving thanks,
and by submitting to one another.

Truth is, that seems insignificant and impotent against this present darkness.
When you want to rage, turn over tables, and clear the temple this seems like playing patty cake.

What if we came at it this way....

A neighborhood friend got into an argument with her sister about politics and the presidency. They went back and forth. Neither one bent or budged. Neither conceded. The rhetoric got more heated. Eventually odious hurtful names were exchanged. There was a family wedding this weekend and one of the sisters stayed home because she was so hurt and angry.

They're not alone. Some of us have had similar exchanges with friend and family. Political divisions can have real-world-relational-consequences. I know that just under the surface of Hope's big tent there bubbles the same ferment, disagreement, and potential for ruptured relationships. But....

But, I also know that we are shaped by what we read, what we listen to, and what we watch. Honest conversations are hard because we're often speaking different languages. If you watch MSNBC your hair is on fire every day because of something that the President said, did, or tweeted. If you watch FOX or listen to talk radio there's a liberal conspiracy to undermine everything-you-hold-dear lurking around every corner and tucked away in every college course.

We are shaped by what we read, listen to, and watch. We are shaped by culture, by the friends we keep, by marketing and media, by family dynamics, by the *zeitgeist* ~ the spirit of the times.

Which why there is wisdom in Paul's admonition.

Part of wisdom calls for being shaped by the will and way of God. And we do that by keeping these spiritual disciplines: Telling the truth to one another in the light of scripture, knowing and singing the songs of scripture, living out of a posture of gratitude, and learning to submit to one another.

Paul is not suggesting quaint quiet time practices; he is calling for us to be formed by the way of the light, not by the way of the darkness. He is calling for lives that are radically different than the way of the world, the way of FOX News, the way of MSNBC, the way of this present darkness. And it is all rooted as living in response to God's grace in Christ.

You are a child of the light. Therefore:

Speak the truth to one another.
Sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.
Live out of the deep well of gratitude.
Submit to one another.

During World War II a group of German Christians created an underground seminary. They were deeply grieved by how Hitler was using Christianity to further hatred and genocide. They were gutted by how many pastors and church members goose-stepped in line with Nazism and anti-Semitism. So, they created a seminary in order to preserve a church that would worship God and not worship political power. They desperately wanted a church that would not follow Hitler but would follow Jesus.

One of the pastors behind that effort was Dietrich Bonhoeffer and during that time he wrote a little book entitled, "Life Together." It details practical ways of being in Christ. It reflects on patterns (spiritual disciplines) for living in response to the grace of God.

About halfway through the book, Bonhoeffer devotes several pages to singing. Which sounds fitting, right? Music has always been a part of Christianity. We sing together.

But, consider that for a minute...

He's risking his life by leading a subversive seminary.

He's teaching illegally under the nose of a brutal evil empire.

And, he's writing about singing?

Seems silly, impotent, trivial.

Expect that Bonhoeffer, even in that darkness, saw something essential in singing. He knew that singing shapes who we are.

He knew that singing is part of the wisdom of God.

Some of what Bonhoeffer wrote is foolish. For example, listen to his issue with singing in harmony....

There are some destroyers of unison singing in the fellowship that must be rigorously eliminated.... There is the bass or the alto who must call everybody's attention to his astonishing range and therefore sings every hymn an octave lower. There is the solo voice that goes swaggering, swelling, blaring, and tremulant from a full chest and drowns out everything else to the glory of its own fine organ. There are the less dangerous foes of congregational singing, the "unmusical," who cannot sing, of whom there are far fewer than we are led to believe, and finally, there are often those also who because of some mood will not join in the singing and thus disturb the fellowship.

Those of you who sing offkey are less of a threat than those who sing parts.

But, Bonhoeffer also recognized that learning a life in Christ is often best communicated through singing. And in doing so there is strength, vision, courage, and participation in a spiritual reality that is ultimately more powerful than the darkness. Again, in his words:

It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing, and you, as a member of the Church, may share in its song.

Dear friends, I don't pretend for a minute to have answers for the darkness and evil that resides in the church. God has built his church with flawed and fallen humanity. Lord, have mercy. And yet it seems to me, that part of the wisdom of God, part of a life lived in the light, is marked by:

Honest conversation with one another. Learning to tell the truth even as we are informed by scripture.

Singing the songs of lament, and confession, and hope, and praise that form and reform our spirits. Singing even in this darkness; singing our way into the light.

Learning in that practice a deep sense of gratitude for the underpinning of God's grace that holds everything together and that one day will overcome all darkness.

May we be shaped by those disciplines.

May we be shaped not by the spirit of the day but by the Spirit of God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.