8-18/19-18 Rev. Amy Haines

Ephesians 5:15-20 Give Thanks…in Love

In the front of our hymnal is John Wesley’s Directions for Singing. Have you ever read them?

They are found in the very front of our hymnal, and even though they were written in 1761 they are still appropriate for our worship today. Here are just a few of his directions:

3. Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find a blessing.

4. Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.

5. Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.

7. Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

- The UM Hymnal p. vii

John Wesley wrote these directions to assist the people called Methodists in their worship.

Yet his brother Charles assisted in his own way, composing many hymns and spiritual songs, some of which we still sing to this day:

Christ the Lord is Risen Today Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

Hark the Herald Angels Sing Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

Depth of Mercy O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing

What is your favorite hymn or praise song to sing lustily and spiritually? Is it your favorite due to a memory? Is it your favorite due to its words? Does it share a story that resonates with your faith journey? Or does it embody your thanks and your praise?

As a singer who loves the harmony of hymns, the energy of praise songs and the messages of contemporary Christian music, I have a really hard time choosing just one favorite hymn or song. I have several favorites, for a variety of reasons and in a variety of seasons. And dare I say we haven’t yet sung them all?

And while I may find myself singing a praise song in the car, or humming a hymn, or constantly having VBS songs looping in the background of my brain, I still know that the most important place to sing our songs of faith is when we gather as the body of Christ for worship.

When we gather for worship, we gather to lift up our common love and praise to God for our salvation through Jesus empowered by the Holy Spirit. When we gather for worship, we gather to give thanks to God for everything. When we gather for worship, we gather to lift one another up by sharing our common story, our common faith, our common purpose.

One way we offer our praise, our thanksgiving, and our retelling of the story of faith is through the singing of our hymns and spiritual songs. Whether in unison or harmony, whether or not we can carry a tune or even know a particular tune, singing is our communal opportunity to remember and give thanks for who and whose we are. Worship is not a spectator sport;

worship invites us all to participate in loving God and caring for one another.

Annual Conference used to always begin with Charles Wesley’s hymn, *And Are We Yet Alive*, a powerful reminder that much had occurred in the past year, and some preachers and parishioners were no longer with us, yet God was still with us and worthy of our praise.

At West Ohio Annual Conference, nothing compares to that Spirit-filled moment when thousands of voices are lifted up together in thanksgiving.

Yet I have heard Spirit-filled praise through song in a room with thousands, a church with 15, and even with a family beside a hospital bed. No matter the size of the community of faith, loving thanks is still offered to God. Worship still happens.

And as the apostle Paul reminds us, worship encourages us to be who we are called to be—one body with one faith following one Lord and led by one Spirit.

Throughout this month of August, we are pondering Paul’s words of encouragement and challenge to the early church in Ephesus, words that invite us as well to live in community with one another built on a foundation of love. We are called to build up one another in love. To live in love. To give thanks in love. To move forward in love.

This is no easy task. We are diverse individuals, from diverse backgrounds and experiences, with diverse faith perspectives, living out our faith in diverse ways. Yet we are still called to be united in our faith, focused on our common Lord and Savior, hearing our common call to be God’s people, Christ’s followers, the community of faith in this world.

In this way we are called to follow our early faith ancestors, Jews and Gentiles who came together from vastly different realities to form a new reality as the Christian church in this world, a new community based on their common faith in Jesus. We continue in their footsteps today as the body of Christ here and now. We continue to be called by Paul to live by a different way of life as the community of faith.

Chuck Swindoll would remind us that the world is watching us. They want to see how this faith we profess makes a difference in our lives. How is following Jesus transforming our lives? How does our faith ground us when reality rocks our lives? How do we support one another in the diverse body of Christ? Can we give thanks in all circumstances?

The world around us, including our families and coworkers, our brothers and sisters in Christ and our neighbors, they want to see how, as Christians, we respond when…

 • we face a dreadful trial from which we cannot escape;  
 • a doctor tells us she's concerned about the X-rays;  
 • the phone rings in the middle of the night with news about someone we love;  
 • we are the target of a complicated and ugly attack.

Will our faith waver, or will our faith be our guiding light?

Will we rely on our own strength, or trust that God is in control?

--heavily adapted from Chuck Swindoll “What Does It Mean to be Filled with the Spirit?” preaching.com

Paul’s words to us today begin with a word of warning:

Be careful how you live.

Be careful how you walk, how you behave, how you travel this faith journey.

Not only are people watching to see whether or not our faith is genuine, there are many temptations seeking to draw us away from God, away from the community of faith, away from intentionally following Christ. If we are not careful, we will suddenly find ourselves far away from the life Christ calls us to live.

So Paul proclaims: Live wisely.

Make the most of the time. Take advantage of every opportunity.

Have you ever tried to buy airline tickets online? You compare websites and research prices for flights. You find one that looks good, and think that tomorrow it may cost less. Yet by the next day, the price goes up, never to appear again at the lower price. The opportunity has passed.

Paul here is encouraging us to recognize that at various times of our lives, we will be given opportunities that only exist for a limited time. Maybe it will be an opportunity to share with a coworker why your faith matters. Maybe it will be an opportunity to assist a neighbor in need.

Maybe it will be an opportunity to serve the church in a specific way. Maybe it will be an opportunity to invite someone to worship with you.

We are called to make the most of the time we have now, for we are never promised tomorrow. We are called to make our faith journey a priority for ourselves and our families now, to set a good foundation of faith for the future.

We are called to make wise choices that honor God and follow Jesus, not unwise choices that meet only our own needs or do not consider the needs of others.

Paul calls us to live wisely.

Paul also calls us to understand the will of the Lord.

So often when we think about God’s will for our lives, we think about God’s advice on the big decisions of life—college and marriage, job changes and new ministry opportunities. Yet God’s will is also for the daily decisions of life. How are we intentional in the ways we practice spiritual disciplines? How does our faith determine how we interact with coworkers and family members, neighbors and strangers? How do we live as one body maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?

Consider what Paul has already said about the will of the Lord. In Ephesians 1:10 Paul already declared the will of God was less about our personal decisions, and more about bringing all things, and all people, together in Christ. In Ephesians 3:10 Paul insisted the purpose of the church is to be a witness to God’s wisdom in our world.

So to understand the will of the Lord means we live lives daily aligned with the grace of God through Jesus. And when we align individually with the grace of God, we align with one another through our common faith in Jesus.

Paul calls us to intentional, wise living that aligns with God’s desire for us to be the community of faith in this world. And Paul declares the only way to do so successfully is to

Be filled with the Holy Spirit. Not with drunkenness.

This comparison may seem a bit strange, yet even on Pentecost the apostles were accused of being drunk when the Spirit led them to speak in tongues and share the good news of Jesus, crucified and risen. Both drunkenness and the Spirit may lead us to do things we otherwise might not normally do.

For Paul, the question is one of control. The Scriptures do not say drinking is a sin. Rather, drunkenness is the sin. For when one is drunk, the drink is in control. How many times in college did I see sorority sisters act out in ways when they were drunk that they would never do sober, in the light of day? Instead of being controlled by alcohol, or drugs, or a desire for success at all costs, Paul calls us to be controlled by the Spirit of God. To be filled by the Holy Spirit.

Yes, the Holy Spirit will move us out of our comfort zones. Yes, the Holy Spirit will call us to step out in new ways to new people to make the most of every opportunity. Yes, the Holy Spirit will challenge our complacency and love of the status quo.

But imagine the power, promise and possibility when we are filled with the Spirit of God within us and among us! If we are serious about being Christ followers here and now and in the future,

with an effective witness reaching out to Springboro and the world, we need to continually pray to God to fill us, and then to be open to where the Spirit will lead us.

When was the last time you prayed for God to fill our congregation with the Holy Spirit? Would you consider praying that prayer as we move into our fall programming and continue to be faithful to who God calls us to be?

Effective ministry will only run so long on our own power. To be truly effective and life giving, to be wise and grateful, we need the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

..Consider the elevated trains that run through downtown Chicago. Those trains run on three rails, two for the wheels and one for the electricity. The electricity is always there, but the train doesn’t move unless there is contact with the third rail. Touch that rail, and the train moves; pull away from the rail, and it stops.

The third rail is like the Holy Spirit; whose power is always available without a shortage or a brownout. But sometimes we live out of contact with that power. When that happens, our lives simply stop working the way God intended.

-Rick Ezell “Doing God’s Will” 8-16-09 preaching.com

A Spirit-filled life is the power to live as Paul instructs us to live. This is not a once and done power, like the affirmation of Jesus at his baptism. Rather, this is an ongoing power, an ongoing filling of the Holy Spirit that nurtures and sustains and guides us throughout our lives and throughout our ministries.

And when we are Spirit-filled, we are called once again to lift up our hearts and our voices in the songs of our faith. When we sing together, when we worship together, when we learn and fellowship and serve together, we remind ourselves of who and whose we are. Together we express our struggles and our joys, our faith and our doubt, our laments and our praise.

We also express our thanksgiving. So Paul reminds us,

And always give thanks to God, at all times and for everything.

..Scottish minister Alexander Whyte was known for his uplifting prayers in the pulpit. He always found something for which to be grateful. One Sunday morning the weather was so gloomy that one church member thought to himself, "Certainly the preacher won't think of anything for which to thank the Lord on a wretched day like this." Much to his surprise, however, Whyte began by praying, "We thank Thee, O God, that it is not always like this."

--*Daily Bread*, August 26, 1989. Sermonillustrations.com:thanksgiving

Yes, there are times when we will struggle to give thanks. How can one give thanks in the face of poverty or homelessness, when children are abused or abandoned, when cancer leads to death or in the face of sudden tragedy? In those times it is well to remember the shortest verse in the Bible—Jesus wept.

Even in those moments that feel unredeemable, we are called to give thanks. To be thankful that God is still with us. To be thankful that God understands our breaking hearts. To be thankful that even in the darkness God’s goodness and light can shine forth.

As Mr. Rogers would say to his television audience,

“My mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother’s words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers —so many caring people in this world.”

Gaither singer and comedian Mark Lowry once wrote,

One of the questions I’ve been asked most by teenagers through the years is this: “How can I know the will of God?” I heard a preacher answer that question with 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. [which is similar to our passage from Ephesians today.] The will of God for you is that you “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks.”

It does not say you have to be grateful *for* everything, just grateful *in* everything. There are some things we go through that we may never be grateful *for*. But we can always we grateful *in* every situation. Gratitude is a state of the heart. You can’t stay miserable and be grateful. Eventually, you have to choose one or the other. And a grateful spirit shows in everything you do. Your face shows it. Your eyes show it. Your words speak it. …

So remember the will of God for you in Christ Jesus: Rejoice! Pray! Be Grateful!

--Mark Lowry, p1552 The Gaither Homecoming Bible

Be grateful! Give thanks!

We have the gift of a Spirit-filled life. We have the gift of responding with our lives to the grace of God offered through Jesus. We have the gift of the community of faith through which we live and grow and pray and praise together.

May such gifts guide our lives, our songs, our faith.

May it be so. Let us pray.