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A Short Series on Ephesians

I. Enough of that Stuff - A Meditation for World Communion Sunday

Psalm 103:1-3, 8-13 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. 2 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits-- 3 who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases.... The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. 9 He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. 10 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who stand in awe of him; 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. 13 As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who reverence him.

Ephesians 1:1-8 1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. 5 He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace 8 that he lavished on us.

A few years ago, National Public Radio did a story about an online magazine that asked its readers to summarize their lives in a single sentence of exactly six words.

The magazine was inspired by the story that is sometimes told of writer Ernest Hemingway, who, when asked if he could write an entire short story in six words, came up with this oh-so-sad and poignant six-word story: *"For Sale: baby shoes, never worn."* And as writers responded to the magazine's call for their six-word life summaries, there were some fascinating and powerful lines received which make you realize that there can indeed sometimes be an immense power in just a few words.

Here are a few of those six-word life summaries: *"Love me or leave me alone."*

"Watching quietly from every door frame." "Some cross-eyed kid, forgotten then found."

"Born in the desert, still thirsty." "Extremely responsible, secretly longed for

spontaneity."¹ You can indeed say a lot in just a few words!

Now, the Apostle Paul was not quite so succinct in what he wrote. But the book of Ephesians, about which I am beginning a short sermon series today, is, in fact, a summarizing of what Paul thinks is important about the meaning of human life before God, about who Jesus Christ is, about how you and I should and should not live, what we should and should not think and believe as those who would follow Christ. It's not six words, but, for Paul, it's actually fairly pithy and succinct. Maybe that's because of the circumstances under which he wrote this letter. Most mainline scholars believe that Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison in the city of Rome about 62 C.E., facing a possible death sentence and, as the great English writer Samuel Johnson once said, when "a man knows he is to die soon it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

It was because of that concentrated, succinct wisdom that the early Church decided that indeed this letter was worthy of being included in the Christian scriptures, the New Testament. For it was written in a time of turmoil. Times when society was running ragged, pushed and pulled by threats from within and without. Times when cultural diversity was changing the face of cities all over the Roman Empire. So those times then were in some ways like our times. Even among the faithful, there was uncertainty about which influences and changes in society were good ones that could be fruitfully incorporated into the faith, and which ones were destructive of the faith. And the bottom line is this: in such times of transition and even turmoil, it is helpful, indeed, to have a kind of summing up of what those who follow Christ should do, think, and believe.

But I am struck by something in this morning's scripture. Of all the things that Paul **could** opened his letter with, **could** have focused on, he zeroes in, not once but three times, on the subject of that universal human tendency to feel unworthy, that

¹<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18768430>

awful sense that way down deep that there is something that you have done or thought that is forever shameful, even unforgivable. I think **that's** why Paul focuses on this fact, when he says, first, that: God intends for us to be "**blameless**." Second, God intends for us to be "**redeemed**" from whatever abiding and seemingly ineradicable fear or guilt that colors our lives. And third, God intends to "**forgive our trespasses**," those places in our psyches that we keep deeply hidden because we fear that we may have crossed a line that has *forever* marked and marred us. Paul's three-fold repetition is meant to emphasize the importance of what he is trying to tell us: You can be **blameless**. You can be **redeemed** from whatever has you imprisoned or ashamed. You not only can be but you are **forgiven**. So, let's dig a little deeper:

A preacher by the name of Allen Hunt says this:

It's hard to be completely clean. It's hard to have everything exactly right – in fact, it's impossible. What would happen if someone looked at every nook and cranny of your life? If they examined every aspect? ... Would they find anger on the carpet? A lackadaisical heart lying on the couch? Towels dripping with gossip?²

Sound familiar? It sure does to me. I am only too aware, even if I'm good at denying it sometimes, of all the tarnished and unclean places in my life, the things I've done of which I'm embarrassed, the words I spoke that still shame me when I remember them, the anger I focused on someone who didn't deserve it. How about you? I suspect that you too have those cupboards and drawers and dark corners of your soul where you keep those actions and statements that you regret, which sullied and tarnished your soul and the person you truly wanted to be. Every one of us, I daresay, has those spots, those patches of dirt and grime clinging to us because of some sins, large or small, long ago or just this morning. Am I right?

²http://day1.org/1026-gods_promises_for_you_i_forgive_you

Well, listen to how preacher Hunt continues; he says:

And God hates uncleanness. He hates to see anger boiling in the heart rather than... love.... God hates the lackadaisical heart that finds it hard to care about God, let alone anybody else. God hates gossip flowing freely off the tongue rather than encouragement or words of praise. God hates the self-indulgence that often replaces compassion and attention to the needs of the people around us.

There is a reason that in so many places in the Bible that the ideas of “cleanliness” and the idea of “sin” are so often seen joined together. For the kind of sins that preacher Hunt is describing do indeed make us feel dirty, unclean, sullied, tarnished – and the furthest thing from blameless there could be!

So maybe that is why Paul begins with this notion and begins with it not once but three times. It is such a common human condition. I have never known anyone who doesn't have something in their past that indeed makes them feel dirty, that indeed manages to make its appearance at 3 a.m. opening those closet doors where we had carefully put all that stuff. And here's what happens: too often, the more that that stuff, that self-blame (even when it is quite warranted!), that sense of sin comes to the fore, refuses to stay hidden, the more we may think that we are not worthy of God's love, God's grace, God's care, God's leading. And, my friends, I suspect that each one of us has also had those moments when we wonder how God could possibly love us, given that we are so aware of the bad things that we have done, or thought or so. And, after all, Reverend Hunt nailed it, didn't he: God hates uncleanness. Hates it. And so what hope do we have?

But wait. Again, Hunt continues and what he says is meant to both surprise us and remind us about something:

God hates uncleanness because he hates anything that sells us short - short of

what we can be, short of our destiny. God hates anything that harms us or prevents us from being the people [we were] designed... to be. God hates anything that chokes off the life He desires for us.... God has higher hopes, holy hopes for us...

Do you hear his point? God does not hate uncleanness and sin because God is a kind of cosmic hall monitor who takes delight in gleefully catching folks in their trespasses. God is not some divine stick-in-the-mud whose job is to make sure no one has any fun and is always looking for the ways we have failed to measure up, the ways we've managed to dirty ourselves. God, despite what some of the shouters from the radio and some of the hate-filled places that disguise themselves as Christians would try to have you believe, God's first love is not wreaking vengeance and judgment on those who would somehow stray.

No. The reason that God hates sin, hates such uncleanness is because of what it does to us, how, indeed, it can make it so much harder to achieve what God truly hopes and wants us to achieve. As I've shared with you before, one of my very favorite lines is this: *"God loves you just as you are, but God loves you too much to let you stay that way."* In these opening lines of Ephesians, then, Paul is acknowledging that universal human condition of feeling unclean, of knowing one is a sinner – but also proclaiming that God can and does go on to forgive us, to redeem us. And so we are indeed not left where we are, wallowing in our guilt, but we are forgiven and transformed so that God can take us places and make us people we never thought possible – and can overcome the barriers that our sin has placed between us and other people.

That, in part, is what World Communion Sunday is about. Established in the years leading up to the horrors of World War II,³ this act that we share with millions of

³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Communion_Sunday

Christians around the world is a sign and a foretaste of what might be, what God hopes would be, when hurt and evil are indeed cleansed and barriers can come down and hope can happen. Thirty years ago, Sally Field received an Oscar for her performance in a movie whose ending portrays this hope far better than I can speak of. The movie is “Places in the Heart” and it is the story of a young widow in depression-era Texas seeking to overcome all kinds of adversity. It is also a story of murder, adultery, a lynching, and deceitfulness. Yet it is also a story of redemption – and the closing communion scene of the film is the director’s attempt to point to a different and better day, to a time when indeed love might triumph over hate. Watch that ending with me now: <http://tinyurl.com/PlacesInTheHeart> In those rows of worshipers are folks who have hurt each other. In those rows are both the living and the dead. In those rows are murderers and their victims. In those rows are folks who have been betrayed by people they love. And the final words of the film are “the peace of God,” said by the man to the young boy who accidentally shot him to death. The peace of God portended by this scene, the triumph of love over hate, is not yet a reality but it is our call to action – to put away the things that divide and dis-unite, to move past blame and uncleanness and guilt toward a new way of being with each other. It is a powerful vision that I believe Paul would have applauded.

Like all people, my mother could sometimes have her moments when she focused on the things she had done wrong, or on the things that left her feeling unclean, on the things that kept her separated from others. She would even find herself sobbing sometimes over her sense of sinfulness. But then she would remember that God indeed didn’t want her stuck in those places, but rather had bigger and better plans for her, made possible through God’s forgiveness and God’s hope. And she would pull herself together, wipe away her tears, and would say, in a line that I remember so very clearly. “*Okay. Enough of that stuff.*” Indeed. Enough of that stuff. That’s what Paul is telling

us, that is what World Communion Sunday reminds us of: *"Enough of that stuff."* Enough of believing that you are forever marred by what you did or thought or said. Enough of fearing that God can't love someone like you. *"Enough of that stuff."* Enough of thinking that God will forever count something against you. Enough of barriers of hate and suspicion and fear and xenophobia. Enough of believing the worst about one another instead of the best. *Enough of that stuff.* Enough. For through the love of Jesus Christ we are indeed made blameless, redeemed and forgiven, that new life and new hope might indeed be possible. May it be so, may it be so.