Pentecost 12 Proper 15

August 15, 2021

Ephesians 5:15-20

All four of our readings for today work together to remind us that we are called into a new way of living.

As Jesus speaks of being the bread of life, he invites us to abide in him as he abides in us. Wisdom, in Proverbs, invites us to the highest place in town — the temple — to share in her feast of abundance and joy. The Psalmist tells us to do good, seek and pursue peace.

But it’s the writer of the letter to the Ephesians who ties all of these together, in just a few short verses.

“Be careful how you live,” he says. In other words, be sure that how you are spending your time is worthy of who you are — a beloved child of God.

It’s all too easy for us to be distracted by things that aren’t really worth our energies. Things that encourage divisiveness. Things that diminish the value of others. Endless pursuit of power and wealth and status, to the point that they become our gods.

“So don’t be foolish, but understand the will of the Lord.”

He says that like it’s easy for us to know the will of God for our lives.

It can feel frustratingly hard to know God’s will when it comes to choices we need to make. But we have a lot of clues throughout Scripture. Proverbs is full of help in that area. The Psalmist tells us to do good and to seek and pursue peace, to live a life where the Lord is our Shepherd and we want lack for nothing. And the prophet Micah says, “what does the Lord require of you but to do what is right, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The paths we take, the choices we make, should be ones that honor those words and honor our identity as beloved children of God.

Wisdom, according to Proverbs, was created before anything else in God’s creation. It’s woven into all that God has made. It is our sinful nature that allows us to be distracted by Folly.[[2]](#footnote-2) And it is our sinful nature that leads us to the excess we are warned about in Ephesians, too.

The admonition about excess is two-fold, really. One is that excessive use of some things can make it harder for us to make wise choices.

The other is that excess teaches us to never be satisfied. Whatever it is that we are tempted to acquire beyond what we need for our daily living can end up taking over our lives.

When Jesus warns us in the Sermon on the Mount[[3]](#footnote-3) to avoid storing up treasures on earth, he’s not saying that having things is bad. We just aren’t supposed to let the pursuit and upkeep of them become the central focus of our lives. They are not to become our gods, the objects of our worship, that which our hearts cling to over everything and everyone else.

Instead of giving in to folly and excess, we are called to live wisely, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to singing psalms and hymns with each other and in our hearts, and giving thanks to God for all of God’s mercies and blessings.

I will admit to having had some rather uncharitable thoughts about my neighbors as I read that part of the passage this week.

Lifting up our voice in song is something we gave up last year. We did it because it was the right thing to do. We trusted that it was a small part of what we could do to demonstrate that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

But even as I was cranky, thinking about how unpleasant it is to sing wearing a mask and worrying that the day may come again when we need to give up singing for a time, I was reminded that the music we hear in this place, the music we sing, often gets stuck in my head, playing on infinite loop throughout the week. Bits of the lyrics repeat over and over, demanding my attention, reminding me of God’s presence.

And I remembered that every time I sing a hymn, it takes deeper root in my heart, just as every time we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, Christ takes deeper root in our hearts.

And, once again, I was overwhelmed by the grace of God. By the depths of God’s love for me — for all of us — and by the notion that God’s grace is infinitely wider than we can ever possibly imagine.

So, once again, I recommitted myself to remembering that God loves my neighbor every bit as much as God loves me.

Our efforts to live wisely, to avoid excess, to seek peace and pursue it, and to give thanks to God at all times for everything, will always be imperfect.

But that’s OK with God.

Because when we do those things, God knows that we are seeking to align our will with God’s will. That we are trying to love our neighbor *not* just as we love ourselves, but as God loves *us*.

It’d be fabulous if we could get it right all the time. But we just…don’t. How we live *knowing that* matters.

It would be so easy to rest in the promise that God forgives our sins. To gather for worship and hear that we are forgiven, offer our praise and thanks to God, then go home and go about the rest of our week doing as we please.

But we are called into a new way of living. A way of living that is different from that which the world embraces. **And that way of living does not place ourselves at the center. God is at the center.**

We humans are so full of potential. We are capable of so much good. That’s how we were created. While God loves us as we are, God knows who we *can be*, and longs for us to grow into that potential. Not to feed our egos, but so we can better love our neighbor and our God.

Those songs and hymns that get stuck in our minds, repeating over and over, are not so much about who we are now, but who we *can be*. What we *aspire* to be, what we *long* to believe with all our hearts.

When those songs of praise take root in our hearts, whether we get to sing them with one another or not, they draw us into a deeper relationship with the God who loves us. They do far more than teach us the faith. They guide us on paths of righteousness. Remind us of the majesty of God’s creation. Comfort us in our sorrows, and offer us new ways to express our joy.

What a precious gift they are for us.

May your heart be filled with the Holy Spirit, and may you always remember that you are a beloved child of God, forgiven and freed, so that you can love your neighbor as you are loved.

1. Micah 6:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Proverbs 9:13-18 — don’t get too caught up in the notion that Wisdom or Folly are female; it’s a metaphor. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 6:19-24 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)