

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Christian Hygiene

I began this sermon with a funny clip from the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou* – Delmar’s baptism. As Methodists (and ex-Catholics) I think we miss something with regards to baptism, because we were baptized as infants so we don’t remember it. Furthermore we were baptized by sprinkling a little water over our heads, not a full submersion in a river or a pool like the Baptists do. I like the drama of a Baptist baptism, which comes when a person is prepared to confess their faith, and though Catholics and Methodists and Lutherans and others confess their faith during Confirmation or Firsts Communion, Confirmation and First Communion just don’t compare to that total body dunking experience. If you just look at Delmar’s face as he comes out of the water; that look of total bliss as he receives assurance that all his sins have been washed away – even that Piggly Wiggly he knocked off over in Yazoo City.

We should not make light of such an important spiritual experience; we should all experience that spiritual cleansing. We all need to sense what it means that Christ died for our sins...all of them! I think one of the negative effects of unchecked positive reinforcement with children is that they can grow into adults who think that they do no wrong, that they don’t sin, but the separation of humanity from God on account of our sin is a central belief among all Christians. We need to acknowledge the sin that corrupts us, that limits us is the cause of so much suffering in our world. Because without consciousness of our sin we find no real need to believe in Jesus Christ who died for our sins...all of them. And the more sins you’ve carried the better the feeling when that fact hits you: Jesus died for my salvation, and I don’t need to be weighed down with guilt or shame over my past. Your sins which were scarlet have become white as snow (Isaiah 1:18). It’s no accident that the baptismal robes that adults wear and gowns that children wear are white to symbolize the cleansing that we experience at baptism.

And baptism is the imagery that Paul uses in this passage from Ephesians. Paul writes, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption" (v. 30). The same Holy Spirit that descended like a dove upon Jesus at his baptism descends upon us when we are baptized and when we confess our faith at our confirmation. The holy water symbolizes a cleansing of sin, but I like the dunking because that represents death and rebirth in Christ, in the Holy Spirit. The white robes are worn to indicate that Christ has cleansed us of our sin; he has removed our old garments which were dirty on account of our sin, and given us new clean clothes to wear, clothes of righteousness and purity. Our English translation of this passage from Ephesians speaks of "putting away" all our bad behavior, but the Greek word translated as "putting away" translates more accurately as "taking off" as one would take off dirty clothes. I did a lot of that down in Texas where Tom and I removed moldy sheetrock and flooring and insulation from people's homes. You feel really nasty by the end of the day. After a full day of getting extremely dirty, it was a great feeling to shed all those dirty clothes and jump in the shower, then to put on a nice clean set of clothes. You know what I mean. Well in a spiritual sense, sin can make us feel extremely dirty. It doesn't matter if the sin is nothing illegal or something "socially acceptable;" it's still sin and it still makes a person feel dirty. YOU NEED A SHOWER! You need a thorough washing as well as clean set of clothes. We need to "take off" the hatred and the envy and the gossip and the jealousy and the pride, and we need to put on the humility and the kindness and the gentleness and the forgiveness.

But you know something? Clean clothes don't stay clean forever. The world has a way of soiling our shirts, of smudging our pants, and eventually we all end up with ring-around-the-collar. It's true that in baptism we are cleansed of our sin, but we are not made perfect. And even though we have been marked with a seal for the day of redemption, we still need to do our laundry regularly. Paul reminds us of this. We are new creations; now we need to live like new creations. And Paul really gives us a glimpse of some of these new creations who are populating the church: "Thieves must give up stealing" (v. 28). I LOVE THAT LINE, because it tells us that there are thieves in the church, which some people think is a bad thing, but the thief is exactly the sort of person that the Church should be ministering to; it's a misperception to think that you have to achieve some level of righteousness in order to join a church. If that were the case there would be no Church. ALL OF US COME TO THE CHURCH AS SINNERS IN NEED OF REDEMPTION, and though we are baptized into the body of Christ (i.e. the Church) we are all works in progress, and we all need to do our laundry regularly.

In a 1976 television interview, Bill Moyers asked a renowned Lutheran pastor Martin E. Marty, "Are you born again?" This was at a time when that expression "born again" was being used a lot by a particular group of Christians. Dr. Marty answered "Yes." Moyers asked when. February 26, 1928 – Dr. Marty was born on February 5th, 1928. Moyers said, "You don't look old enough for that early date." Dr. Marty explains that Moyers was thinking "Baptistically," that being "born again" would be the day of your "conversion"; But Dr. Marty was talking about his baptism at three weeks of age. Moyers asked Dr. Marty, "And that does it for life?" and Marty answered, "'Yes' and 'no.' I was also 'born again' this morning." Martin Luther speaks of *daily* baptism, of a washing that has to

occur as soon as the need arises. If we're honest with ourselves, that need arises quite often.

So I would challenge all of you (and myself) to pray a heartfelt prayer of confession at the end of each day if not more frequently, and not the generic "forgive-me-for-I-have-sinned" prayer, but a prayer where you NAME your sins. Be specific. Name the dirt that you need to be rid of. We don't walk around in public wearing dirty, stinky clothes; we shouldn't walk around in *spiritually* stinky clothes either. Paul says we need to be imitators of God, to live in love as Christ loved us (v. 1).

Because we're on a mission. Last week I mentioned how important it is for us to be good witnesses of God's love. This book of Ephesians really emphasizes how important we are to the world, that God's ultimate goal is to bring all things into harmonious unity in Christ. Not just the Church, and not just humanity, but *ALL THINGS* into harmonious unity in Christ. This is not accomplished by coercion – telling people to believe in Jesus **or else**. It's accomplished when we put on Christ, when we live into the new creation that we were created to be, and that means that we need to do our laundry regularly, and we need to maintain good Christian hygiene.