

August 16, 2009

Ephesians 5:15-20

“Spirit-filled living”

Later this month my husband and I will be leaving on vacation, to spend a couple weeks with his family members and friends in France. We try to visit every two years, when we can, and we cherish those times. There have been long periods, earlier in our marriage, when more than 5 years would pass without us being able to see any of his family. So—we have become grateful travelers, trying to handle the challenges and fatigue of long trips with good grace.

Today, I'd like us to travel in our imaginations to a distant land. The short little books near the end of the Bible are, for the most part, letters written by early Christians. That's why they are called “epistles”. The vast majority were written by the apostle Paul, who traveled throughout the Mediterranean, preaching and starting churches, which mostly met in people's homes.

Today's Scripture comes from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus—from the book of Ephesians.

Ephesus was located in what today is the nation of Turkey. It was a large western seaport city. People of many different ethnic, language and religious groups resided there. Today ethnic Turkish Muslims live in a land once occupied by a tremendous array of cultures and empires. It is one of the most historically and archeologically rich regions of the world.

Paul's converts lived in a thriving city filled with a multitude of religious practices. The early Jewish converts had to find their way to accept Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all their hundreds of years of monotheistic faith. It was, for many, a radical leap to take. But the teachings of the God of the Old Testament and those of Jesus of Nazareth were in the same stream, flowing one to another.

For the Gentile Christians of ancient, cosmopolitan cities, there was a smorgasbord of religions, and temples, and practices and beliefs, many of which moved in opposite directions from the teachings of Christ.

Some of the religious practices in Ephesus claimed to provide mysterious truths and wisdom to special people. There were festivals, such as those honoring Dionysus, that encouraged believers to get drunk, wild and frenzied in order to receive divine messages. This actually reminds me of my youth in the late 1960's, when drugs like LSD were used in search of "mind-expanding" experiences.

Today's reading begins by warning the Christians living in this cultural melting pot to be extremely cautious. "Be careful how you live.....don't be foolish." The "foolishness" of their time was to get sucked into "vain human attempts to gain easy access to the divine", as K. Elizabeth Rennie puts it.

We are still tempted to be the ones in charge of everything—even in charge of our spiritual development and receiving of truth and wisdom. "I'LL DO IT MYSELF!" we think. But this Scripture says GOD DOES IT. Not US. GOD. We need to be filled by the Holy Spirit. God does the filling. We are not in charge of it. Alcohol and mind-altering substances are not required. All that's needed is a humble heart and openness. To be filled with the Spirit, we need to be OPEN. Rev. Leonard Sweet suggests that to be filled with the Spirit we need to be **open-minded, open-hearted, and open-handed.**

We need to be **open-minded.** This does not mean "empty-headed"! But it means hushing up to listen to God. It means setting aside our agendas to listen to someone who thinks differently. It means "thinking outside the box". It means sometimes God will call us to do something even though "We've never done it that way before!" It means being willing to consider new possibilities. It means trying things that we see as beyond our abilities. It means embracing visions that are global and beyond our current place and time.

The timeline for building great European cathedrals often extended over the lifespan of three or four generations. Without machinery, the master builders relied on workers who hand-cut stones and hauled them on their backs. The first builders knew they would never see the completion of their life's work, but they were able to keep their minds open to a vision of how all the tiny pieces would finally come together in a work of beauty and glory.

An open mind invites God's Spirit in, and accepts with joy the small tasks given to us, as God works the transformation of the world.

To be filled with the Spirit we need to be **open-hearted**. The Ephesians are told, “Don’t open your mouths to guzzle wine- but open them to sing God’s praises.” This wasn’t sappy sentimentality. They were encouraged to sing the Psalms of the Old Testament. The Psalms were songs. We don’t have the melodies, so we often read them as poetry, although many hymns and songs use the words of the Psalms as lyrics.

The Psalms confront God with what people really feel. They are prayers to God and express fear, rage, loss, misery, joy, hope, love, gratitude and yearning. The psalmists poured out their hearts to God. That’s how we are to be “open-hearted”. When we pour out all that lies in our hearts, they become open to what God is ready to pour into them. When our hearts are clogged with pain or even joy that is still unexpressed, we cannot receive the Holy Spirit which God is waiting to pour into them.

To be filled with the Spirit we need to be **open-handed**. This is like the old image, you can’t take what someone wants to give you, if both your hands are tightly holding onto something. You have to put what you’re clutching **DOWN**, in order to receive what you’re being offered.

We can’t be filled with the Spirit when we are clutching a multitude of stuff with both hands.

We have to set down all our stuff—possessions, time, words, attempts to be in control. We set down our stuff, our hands are open, and God puts things into our hands. He may put running a bake sale for the school into our hands. He may put concern for a friend in our hands. He may put ethical management of a project at work into our hands. He may put chairing a church committee into our hands. Or he may put time to enjoy an hour in the garden into our hands. Or he might put the hand of a restless child into our hands. Or he might put the hand of one who is concerned about us into our hands. Sometimes God calls us to put some of the money he has given us into our hands in order to offer it to someone else—a person in need, an organization doing his work in the world, a ministry that needs our financial support.

This is how we are filled by the Holy Spirit of God and with the Holy Spirit of God—we choose to be **open-minded, open-hearted and open-handed**.

Rev. Sweet's trio reminds me of the United Methodist Church's slogan: OPEN MINDS, OPEN HEARTS, OPEN DOORS. The saying meant to communicate that United Methodists are people with open minds, open hearts and open doors. There was some widespread advertising using that phrase for a number of years.

I have to confess that as a United Methodist pastor over the past 22 years, I have sometimes worried that we might be engaging in false advertising!! Because we are not always so open, you know.

But in the past year the United Methodist Church has begun a new movement called RETHINK CHURCH. This movement invites us to turn those adjectives into VERBS! The phrase becomes something we DO, rather than something we ARE.

Wow. Can we be a people who OPEN minds, who OPEN hearts, who OPEN doors? Today's Scripture calls us to do that! To open ourselves that we might receive the Holy Spirit and become who God calls us to be!

Spirit-filled living is OPEN, that I am sure of. Open to the Holy Spirit through having open hearts, minds, doors and hands. AND Spirit-filled living OPENS minds, hearts, and doors of those within the church to those outside it, in ways that draw us all closer to Christ.

Spirit-filled living is OPEN. I want to leave you with a phrase that comes from the RE-THINK church emphasis. It's a phrase that I think could be mind-opening—maybe even mind-blowing—so here it is:

What if church wasn't a place we go, but something we do? Hmm. Let's open our minds, hearts, hands, and doors to let the Holy Spirit in, as we mull that over.

Amen. Amen.