

Michelle James

1 Corinthians 5

“State of the Church: 5. Sex, Marriage, and Immorality”

14 October 2007

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sex, Marriage, and Immorality—how’s that for a sermon title? It’s certainly catchy, isn’t it? And I thought to myself when Tom and I looked over the topics for the “State of the Church” sermon series, “Wow! That’s certainly a catchy topic. I can’t wait to hear what Tom’s going to do with that one!” So, I’m still trying to figure out how this one fell on *my* Sunday to preach!

At any rate, I guess we can tell that Paul has his hands full with this group. And he is not afraid to tackle any topic! In order to discover why, we need only look back to the beginning of the letter which we read just a few weeks ago. Paul had heard from Chloe’s people that the good folks at Corinth have been bickering amongst themselves about who was more spiritually mature. Paul is upset about the division this has created in the church, and reminds them that they are God’s field, God’s building.

This morning’s passage is another example of some thinking they were more spiritually mature than others. Paul has been absent for awhile and in his absence, some of the Corinthians have become arrogant, thinking they are above the law. Those weaker Christians, as they are sometimes called, are hurt and offended and the church has begun to splinter off into cults of personality—those who belong to Apollos, or Paul, or Cephas, or Christ.

Paul begins this section of his letter by calling out a particular individual by the wrong he has committed. But the surprise here is that Paul chastises the church for the offense! Apparently, there are those in the church who have claimed, once again, their spiritual maturity and freedom in Christ from the things of this world have raised them above the weaker Christians. You might recall that there was an attitude of Stoic wisdom flourishing in Corinth during this time. And this may be why they were led to believe that they had transcended fleshly hang-ups, and so were free to participate in whatever they pleased. This fellow who is living with his father’s wife, has violated the deuteronomic law which forbids a man to lie with his father’s wife or to marry her. But to this man, his freedom in Christ assured him that what he was doing was either right, or at least of no moral significance.

And the arrogant church members were boasting about this man’s affair and celebrating him as a hero of Christian freedom! Paul very calmly tells the church that their boasting is not a good thing, and reminds them that the judgment against this man is removal from their fellowship. In removing him from the church, Paul is asking them to remember that they are the field or the building, the foundation on which Christ builds. If they do not do something about this offense, it is like yeast which leavens the whole batch of dough. The church itself will become corrupted.

If you recall from a few weeks ago, Paul is struggling in this whole letter to bring the normative church to bear on the blood and guts church. He wants to remind the church in the world, the blood and guts church, who she is called by God to be, and that is no less than Christ’s body in the world. The church cannot allow an “anything goes” attitude because that’s what they do “out there” in the world. God has called the church to be set apart as Christ’s servants, and as such, she is to hold herself to a different standard than the rest of the world.

The church sets up standards or rules, many of which are based on biblical norms, and each of us makes a covenant when we become members of Christ’s body to live by and uphold those rules and standards. Yet

when it is not convenient or when it might offend or hurt another's feelings, we are willing to break the very covenant we made with God and one another. Because our culture has bought in to a mindset of warm fuzzies and feel-good ideals, we believe that all things should make us feel all warm and fuzzy, and especially the church where we are all expected to clap each other on the back and smile and feel good about ourselves when we part company. We have deluded ourselves into believing that the "caring" thing to do is to be non-judgmental and inclusive at all costs. And I believe that Christ calls us to love and care and to be inclusive in our loving and caring, but what this passage makes clear is the way in which we are called to preserve the integrity of the church, the covenant relationship which we entered when we were adopted into the family of Christ.

And we are certainly concerned when we learn of some kind of sexual immorality taking place in the church. We have seen how this kind of behavior damages the church beyond just the ones involved in the immoral behavior. Lord knows we've heard plenty of stories and many of us have experienced the tragedy which befalls a congregation when an affair within the covenant community comes to light.

But Paul doesn't stop at the sexual immorality which has invaded the Corinthian church. He said that anyone who calls him or herself a Christian who is involved in sexually immoral behavior as well as those who are greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber should be called to judgment within the covenant community. He places all of these together in the way in which they damage the community of faith. In the same way in which the yeast leavens the entire batch of dough, so do these cancerous abuses corrupt the whole body when left unchecked. The cancer has to be removed and the body treated before the healing and transformation can take place. In the same way, Paul says, the one who offends the body must also be removed and treatment given before the offender and the body can be healed. And I believe that is what Paul desires for Christ's body.

Paul's concern to this point has been the way in which the blood and guts church, right here in this place, is called to exhibit the ideals of the normative church, to actually become the body of Christ in the world. If the cancers which invade the body are left unchecked, the body will grow weaker and weaker until finally, she will die. And yet, the church in recent times has grown reticent. We are afraid of conflict for fear of offending or being singled out. And yet we stand idly by while many around us need help. We participate in gossip and help to spread harmful rumors. Rather than confront someone who has wronged us or talk to one with whom we differ, we prefer to tell others about the offense or the problem and a cancer is born.

Why are we so afraid to stand up for the church and to become the new batch of dough? Why do we prefer the yeast of malice and evil, rather than the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth, as Paul puts it? I think it's because it is hard work, and we all want to be loved and wanted. If we tell someone we cannot participate in something the other is doing, we run the risk of being different, unlovely, judgmental, mean. It is hard work to run counter to others. It is hard work to suggest that someone rethink their behaviors. It is risky for one's self-esteem, and perhaps it also runs the risk of allowing ourselves to be placed in the category of fanatic.

But we have to ask ourselves what it is that we are as the blood and guts church, called to exhibit the ideals of the normative church. We are adopted into God's family, grafted into the body of Christ, when we are baptized, and we become new people, members of a new community, a new batch of dough, cleansed of the old yeast of malice and evil.

I recall a story which took place in 1837, in a congregational community in Eatonton, Georgia. A number of people had been converted, and one day they were all gathering by the river for a baptism. One of the persons being baptized was a teenage girl. Her name was Caroline, or Carrie for short. Carrie had become a convert with a great deal of conviction. She said in her own testimony, "I desire to be even more devoted to my Savior than I have ever been to the world." This was her intense desire. There at the riverside was one of her friends

who was yet unconverted whose name was Julia. Julia had been very close to Carrie in all kinds of worldly exploits. So this non-Christian girl was now watching the baptism of her closest friend. Someone recorded the event like this:

Of course everybody was there. The banks of that little stream were lined with crowds of interested spectators...Julia, of Monticello, her bosom friend and companion in her worldly course, seemed loathe to leave her even for a moment and clung to her till she reached the water's edge. A hymn was sung and [Rev.] Mallory made a few remarks and offered prayer, when [Rev.] Dawson took Carrie by the hand and led her down the shelving bank into the limpid stream. They had attained about half the desired depth, when she requested him to stop a moment, and, turning to those on the bank, waving her hand, she said, "Farewell, young friends! Farewell, Julia!" The effect was electrical. The whole audience convulsed, and tears rained down from eyes unused to weeping...Upon coming up out of the water, Julia rushed forward to meet her friend, embracing her, and crying out in agonizing tones, "*Oh, Carrie! You must not leave me! Mr. Dawson, pray for me. Mr. Mallory, pray for me?*"¹

If only we all had that sense of new life when we emerge from the watery grave of baptism! Our baptism, our identity in Christ, calls us to a new way of living. We, as individual members of the church, are called to a new way of life, and together, as the body of Christ, we are God's holy temple, in whom God's Spirit dwells. When we violate God's commandments, allowing jealousy, arrogance, greed, gossip, quarreling, drunkenness, immorality and idolatry, we live in the flesh, as infants in Christ. But when we strive for the higher way of service, humility, peace, justice, kindness, patience; when we allow ourselves to be open to the correction of the scripture and the church, striving for the unity of the church, God is glorified and the church is built up.

The paschal lamb has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. God said to the people of Israel, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. Choose life so that you may live."

¹Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion*, (New York: Oxford, 1997), 16.