

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, January 15, 2012.

(1 Samuel 3:1-10(11-20); 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51)

Let's hear again these words from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. "Shun fornication!" Just what you wanted to hear on a Sunday morning. But these words also, "Glorify God in your body." "Shun fornication and glorify God in your body." believe it or not, these words do contain some good news. But they also contain a lot of frustration and confusion because we're aware of so many people who have used them not to bring good news, but to bring shame and condemnation. And we're aware of the tendency to label people as fornicators, sexual amoral folk who are to be rejected, avoided and despised. The word fornication reminds me of my days as a student at UNC Chapel Hill because there was a -- I figured that would go over well in a Duke crowd -- but for other reasons than perhaps you might think. There was an area in the middle of campus called The Pit that many of you know. It's sort of a sunken area in the middle of campus where students meet and socialize. And there are these preachers that come to The Pit and they stand there and they preach at us and they use that word fornication like a whip, trying to just -- we're going to whip those students into shape. They're trying to convert those students out of their heathen ways and their fornicating ways. And mostly we were just entertained, I have to admit.

And a lot of us, though, we like to hear Paul in that same voice as a Pit preacher trying to whip his people into shape, trying to lecture them about the vices and the virtues and the ought nots and shoulds and things they should avoid and things they should embrace. And yes, Paul can sound like this on the surface, but if we listen more carefully, there is a more profound message. Last week we had the privilege of having Dr. Richard Hays, the dean of the Duke Divinity School and professor of New Testament, with us to kind of give us an overview of First Corinthians. And he used this phrase that I love in describing why Paul is writing to the Corinthians. He said Paul is about a conversion of imagination. The problem was that the Corinthians had a limited view, a limited imagination of what life in the kingdom of God looked like. And Paul wanted to help them see the broader vision, that we are citizens of that kingdom and members of a holy body, a body bound together not by selfish desires, but by divine love.

Fornication or sexual immorality is only part of the situation that Paul is addressing in this letter. And in many ways the overarching challenge that the Corinthians faced was one of hospitality. They didn't know how to really welcome one another as children of God. Corinth was tough place to be a Christian. It was really the sin city, the Vegas of its day. Literally it was a Caesars Palace in that the emperor had had the city built so that the new rich, the nouveau riche, could have a place to go and live and entertain themselves. And it was even known for the fact that it was a manufacturing town when they made mirrors. Talk about self centered and shallow culture.

So when Paul founded a church there, he had to teach them about hospitality, about inviting others into relationships because really the people there weren't that good at that. The Corinthian church, it was probably less than 100 people and they were meeting in various homes, house

churches. And even in such a small group, there were divisions, there were cliques. They were not able to welcome each other because they were too busy arguing about who was the best leader. There was another problem in that they were taking one another to court rather than seeking reconciliation, and that's a hospitality problem when you're closing doors instead of opening them. The sexual immorality issue was essentially a question of appropriate hospitality because instead seeing physical and spiritual intimacy as an opportunity to invite another person into loving relationship, members of the church in Corinth, some members, were involved in sexual liaisons that were about using another person, about power and manipulation over another person instead of mutual welcome.

Paul also mentions the hospitality problems the Corinthians had around eating at one another's tables, particularly around when they would gather for the holy communion or the Lord's Supper, their early version of what we now know as Eucharist. They would meet in these house churches and the rich hosts would eat all the food and get drunk before the poorer members of the congregation had had anything. Corinthians had a lot to learn about hospitality. So Paul writes his letter not as a shaming preacher, but as a humble and yet firm, definitely firm, pastor who used the problems of the community to guide that community into a conversion of imagination.

This weekend our nation remembers the life and legacy of another preacher and pastor, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And King, too, saw the particular problems of our society as an opportunity to encourage a conversion of imagination about how people could live together. And hospitality, again, this is the core of the issues of class and race, oppression that King addressed. Racism is a failure to welcome one another as children of God. But just as we sometimes hear Paul as merely a whip-cracking Pit preacher, I think we sometimes also mis-hear the voice of Dr. King as merely a voice of tolerance. We forget that he sought conflict more than he sought to end it because he was attempting to get people to see a bigger picture. I think in general our society still needs further agitation about a conversion of imagination around race and class. We've too often settled for being politically correct or gestures that don't offend, but also that don't offer a sincere welcome.

Our culture, like the Corinthian church, still has a very limited vision of hospitality. We may have resolved some of the particular issues that Dr. King addressed, but we have a long way to go toward living into his dream. And so whether we're talking about racism or sexual immorality or any of the ways in which we have failed to receive one another as children of God, we cannot be content with limited vision. Fornication, for example, it means more than just a list of no-nos, more than just a list of things we should avoid. Paul would want us to see fornication as part of a failure of imagination and hospitality. A failure to welcome one another in covenant love. With a converted imagination about these things, we are off the road that ends with shaming and blaming our bodies and on to a holy road that leads toward glorifying God in our bodies.

It's interesting, I think Paul uses the language of sex partly because there were sexual immorality issues going on in Corinth, but he also uses that language because it expresses the closeness and the power of relationships in God's kingdom. This closeness has little to do with physical intimacy, but it does involve our whole selves. And this closeness, this intimacy in God's

kingdom requires that we approach with extreme care, fleeing from anything that makes us less than whole and holy creations of God.

Permit me to take a little sidetrack here. Speaking of things that make us less than whole and holy, the word fornication, it comes from a Greek word that is also the root of the word pornography. Pornography, as we know, these days is easy and tempting to access. And we don't talk about it a lot in the Episcopal church. Maybe because we're above such things or maybe because we're not above such things or maybe because we are just afraid to sound like Pit preachers. But as Christians seeking a conversion of imagination, we are in conflict with pornography. And that's not just because it's a no-no. Not just because it's taboo. And I'm certainly not saying that all sexual images are bad. What I call pornography are the images that portray human bodies solely as tools of pleasure and profit, as objects to be manipulated and controlled. Such images cripple our imagination. They do not invite us into a greater understanding of what it means to be children of God and they diminish our capacity to see one another as fully human. So we have to take pornography seriously and we have to ask ourselves whether as Christians what our relationship with pornography is going to be. Someone said to me, "I'm an Episcopalian. I want to make up my own mind about these things." But I want us to be aware of that sense that these images distort our view of one another.

Seeing one another as fully human is what Paul is about in First Corinthians. When he exhorts his readers to glorify God in your body, he is saying that our bodies are holy, holy vessels. That part of being fully human is to be connected to God in mind, body and spirit. But he's also talking about the collective body of the church that he uses as a plural "you." Glorify God in you all's body, as we say in the South. Means that we express our full humanity when we are in communion, when we are bound and beholden to each other. As the body of Christ, we preach the good news that God has created us for glory together, not for shame alone. And through Christ we have been empowered by God to overcome our selfish ways, to gather at a common table and share what we have, to love and welcome and hold one another accountable as children of God.

In a world where the voices of Dr. King and others still remind of us of how far we have to go, Paul reminds us that with God, we have already been raised with Christ to new life and new light and freedom. Because of what we have been given, we as the church, we stand in a powerful place to continue to call for a conversion of imagination. And we need not point a scolding finger. We need to point our hearts and minds and bodies toward God and pray for an imagination to see as God sees, to love as God loves and to be as God has created us to be.