

Be Careful How You Live

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Third Presbyterian Church

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Ephesians 5:15-20

At first read, the beginning of today's text from Ephesians feels like it belongs to what David Von Drehle has called a "gospel of no-no's" - a legalistic set of vices to avoid. You probably know that version, don't you? In today's world it feels almost quaint. Naive, even.

I personally heard verse 18 quoted many times - "do not get drunk with wine." In addition to prohibiting all forms of alcohol, the religious culture of my earliest years threw in a few more - no card-playing (which finally became acceptable by the time I got to high school), and no dancing (which only became okay once I got to college). For my grandmother, dancing was a terrible sin. In some of her written remembrances, she wrote, "Sometimes we played musical games at weddings, which today are called folk dances. We just didn't know they were dances."

Yes, at face value, quaint and naive. Be careful how you live. Don't do this; don't do that. And if you do, definitely don't overdo it. And although the vices we see listed in the New Testament epistles were common in many writings from the first century, Scripture never leaves it there. It always looks to transform it into something more. And that's the case here.

There's a deeper question that this text speaks to - an age-old question that always accompanies the human condition: With what do we fill the emptiness of life that we encounter?

My heart broke this week, several times. It broke watching news footage of person after person dropping onto the ground in New Haven Park - a mass overdose on K2 synthetic marijuana. Setting aside legal and medical and even moral considerations, the underlying question I wonder about is the pastoral question, the spiritual question: What is the emptiness that people are seeking to fill with substances that can harm? What do they really yearn for that they haven't found? What is the pain that they are trying to dull? What hurts so much that people will risk their lives and risk hurting those they love in order to fill some emptiness or stop some pain?

What we fill our lives with matters. What we fill our hearts and souls with matters - to us, to others, and to God, because in a broken world it is so easy to be deceived by cheap shiny alternatives.

It's not a matter of saying "no" for "no's" sake, or even a matter of saying "no" to avoid getting hurt. It's a matter of saying "no" to intoxicating our bodies, ourselves with poor substitutes, so that we can say "yes" to the Spirit and bring the fullness of God's "yes" to bear. The "yes" that in Walter Brueggemann's words God said to us in creation, in our birth, in our baptism, in our awakening.¹

Today's Scripture also speaks to the corporate body of the church, not just to individuals.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Yes," *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*, p. 91.

My heart broke again this week - this time over the report released by a Pennsylvania grand jury on church cover-ups of clergy abuse. It's a devastating lesson on the intoxicating effects of power on people and on institutions - even religious ones otherwise dedicated to so many good and charitable acts.

And thus, the admonition to "be careful how you live" and "pay attention to what you let intoxicate you" becomes not just a private matter, but a matter for the whole church, no matter what denomination.

It's easy for the church to settle for less than God's "yes." We'll settle for the substitutes of cultural respectability and community influence. We'll become intoxicated with the memory of the church's glory years and the desire to "get them back," whatever that means. Who hasn't thought that, at least once?

And in an era where cultural expectations no longer make church a requirement, it's easy to become intoxicated with the sense that we can go it alone in our faith. We don't need others to be part of our relationship with God. Whatever works for me, whatever suits me is all I need; I'll just order off the a la carte spiritual menu. It's what my colleague Greg Hall calls "the American heresy of individualism." I say this not to throw a blanket of guilt, not at all - (okay maybe just a little bit), and I say it not to suggest that there is no room for difference in understanding, but to suggest that God's "yes" calls us to something we can only become together - a people who experience wholeness when we worship and serve together alongside those who ache with emptiness - those for whom our hearts break and for whom God's heart breaks.

The expression of God's "yes" in the letter to the Ephesians is to "be filled with the Spirit," as you sing songs and hymns and spiritual songs together. The language of Scripture and song together shapes and fills us; it's our primary language and has "transformed and sustained people worldwide for centuries in a way that no other language has," writes Jaime Clark-Soles. When words and sermons don't hit the spot, hymns and song can do that.²

I've found that to be true in my own life. During times of a deep and empty ache in my soul, Scriptures that come to mind and well up from within just as I need them are those that I learned in song together with my faith community.

This week's death of Aretha Franklin underscores the spiritual and transformative power of song to experience God's Spirit, to draw the community together, and even to resist the evil of prejudice and oppression.

In a New York Times Op-Ed, Baptist Minister Michael Eric Dyson wrote: "Franklin could trap lightning in her mouth at a moment's notice and shout down fire to earth...Her uncanny aptitude was so compelling that the congregation knew that greatness and the Spirit rested in double portion on this fearless young woman. She transformed Otis Redding's punchy "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" into a timeless anthem for racial pride and a cry of feminist recognition. Her church got larger, her congregation composed of millions of people in search of a soulful vision of spiritual direction beyond sanctuary doors."³

² Jaime Clark-Soles, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2*.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/16/opinion/aretha-franklin-church-detroit.html>

Our youth director, Jane Carden, came back from this summer's trip with our youth to the Montreat Youth Conference with a story about the transformative power of spiritual song. She's graciously allowed me to tell her story.

Jane said that this summer's Montreat experience had to be one of the best! "From Keynote to small group, from recreation to Worship, from prayer to music, conferees were challenged to explore and embrace this year's theme, "Lift Every Voice". They explored the many voices in their lives...God's voice, their own voice, silenced voices, tortured voices, united voices. And even as they were challenged to speak out because their voices matter, Jane said it was the worship experiences that left the deepest impression.

Their worship leader, Rev. CeCe Armstrong from Charleston SC, introduced them to the hymn, Lift Every Voice (#339, GTG). While it was familiar to some, to the majority it was new.

At the beginning of the week, the youth learned the history behind the hymn...that it was written first as a poem by James Weldon Johnson. He collaborated with his brother, John Rosamond Johnson, to put his poem to music and have it performed a year later by a High School chorus at an Abraham Lincoln birthday celebration. The youth at Montreat learned that today it is embraced and widely known as the Black National Anthem.

Rev. CeCe closed Monday's sermon by having her choir from St. James Presbyterian share the hymn. She encouraged everyone there to sing along, but Jane said it wasn't until the final verse that most of those did so, albeit feebly. They were mostly caught up in the music, struck by the power, the feeling, the reverence with which the choir sang. But it really wasn't singing,; rather it was praying. Jane said, "We were in awe...drawn close, fed, and energized. It was a true Holy Spirit moment!

As the week unfolded, CeCe preached on one of the verses each night, and closed every service with the singing of the hymn. Jane said, "On Monday we were captivated by the choir and just sang the hymn. By Friday, all of us, youth and adults alike had a better grasp of the meaning behind the words, the importance of these words...we more than sang this hymn...we prayed this hymn." In other words, today's Scripture text come to life.

In just a few moments, we are going to deviate from the hymn printed in your bulletin, and instead sing that very hymn - it's hymn #339 in your hymnbooks. We're going to "sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us," we're going to "Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us." Because for the sake of a broken and empty world, we must.

In one of his many beautifully written prayers, Walter Brueggemann prays, "We are people who must sing you, for the sake of our very lives. You are a God who must be sung by us, for the sake of your majesty and honor. And so we thank you, for lyrics that push us past our reasons, for melodies that break open our givens, for cadences that locate us home, beyond all our safe places, for tones and tunes that open our lives beyond control and our futures beyond despair. We thank you for the long parade of mothers and fathers who have sung you deep and true; we thank you for the good company of artists, poets, musicians, cantors, and instruments that sing for us and with us, toward you. We are witnesses to your mercy and splendor; We will not keep silent...ever again."

Let us lift our voices and sing hymn number 339, "Lift Every Voice and Sing."