

Toward a Fierce Commitment
Tenth Sunday After Pentecost
August 9, 2015
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Texts: 2 Samuel 18.5-9, 15, 31-33;
Psalm 130;
Ephesians 4.25-5.2;
John 6.35, 41-54

Talk to a young person about what kind of faith – what sort of Christian – they admire and they will likely tell you about someone who is actively and directly doing something that matters. They are sometimes called the generation of “causes.”¹ They are bombarded by people trying to get their attention, to sell them something, or to enlist their involvement. What catches their attention, at least for some, when it comes to communities of faith is activism. It is the church who is feeding the poor, raising the banner for inclusion, standing against racism, stemming the tide of global warming; taking faith out of the realm of theory and philosophy and into the realm of action.

This is the generation who has been raised during the war on terror. The combination of the shrinking globe, the 24-7 news feed, and the unending human brutality that we cannot help but know about as a result has left its mark. In fact, it has left its mark on all of us. We cannot close our eyes and pretend that progress is inevitable. We know that human beings can become broken and twisted and are capable of unspeakable evil. As followers of Jesus we make the claim that good is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, (remember this John Bell song) light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death. If we are going to make this claim with integrity then we cannot live with apathy. We cannot let half measured Christianity-by-name-alone be our witness. What we need in this day is to live toward a fierce commitment.

¹ James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 99.

Ephesians has been pushing us to understand that there is an old life and a new life. The old life is driven by the ways of the world. It's the default mode when we fall back into the values of our culture or our background instead of being driven by the profound truth of who we are as beloved of God, chosen before the foundations, and shaped by the wisdom and insight of God's Spirit; all the good stuff spoken of us in Ephesians chapter 1. The new life is forged by following after God (and for us who live after Christ we would say) following after God in the way of Jesus.

In the books of 1 & 2 Samuel we watch as David winds his way in and out of the old and new life. Two weeks ago when Dr. Chris de Groot, an OT professor from Calvin College, was with us she reminded us that this wasn't a linear project for David and it probably won't be for us either. There were times when David defaulted to the ways of the world letting his power isolate him for all manner of accountability, when he abdicated his royal responsibility by staying home when the kings went out to war, by doing what was expedient to cover his tracks when he was caught in his sin. When his children followed in his footsteps and incest and abuse was discovered in his home - when he did nothing to protect his daughter or to hold his son accountable - people began taking revenge and the death toll is stunning.

And yet David is called the man after God's own heart. Dr. de Groot claimed that we get to see why in the moment when David was confronted by the prophet Nathaniel and he did not shrink from the accusation but confessed putting away all of the excuses and all of the privilege he could have invoked as king and instead turned toward God and toward the light. But as you read the story, you recognize a lifelong commitment to God is not a one-time decision. David's was not a linear progression.

We have another moment here toward the end of David's life which we read today when the consequences of all of those entanglements from the old life are still playing out when his son Absalom is in danger and David longs for his restoration; to put an end to the cycle of retribution and revenge. When he hears that the ways of the world have won out and his son is dead, he weeps for his son, for his own failures, for the ways of the world that are evil and broken. This moment of utter heart break like the

earlier moment of confession gives a picture into why David is so beloved of God. Here at the end of his life he is turning once again toward the light of God.

What the story of David reveals in narrative form the book of Ephesians lays out for us in exhortation. If we want to live in the light and be surrounded by love and experience the goodness of God then we have to bring a fierce commitment to actively participating in the new life that is ours in Jesus Christ. These commitments and these choices touch everything from the way we speak the truth with kindness to how we handle anger to the ways we conduct our work and share with those who have need to how quickly we forgive. It's all encompassing.

There is a phrase that shows up in this passage multiple times: put away. Verse 25 says putting away all falsehood let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors. Verse 31 says put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling...and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you. I read a commentator who pointed to the meaning of this word "to put away" and connected it to the practice in the early church around baptism. When people came to be baptized they would face the west and renounce the forces of darkness then turn and face the east at sunrise to proclaim their allegiance to the light of the world.²

In a very active way they would remind themselves to put away the old life and to take up the new. Last week I had the privilege of listening to a seminary student named Yeom Jeong take his senior exams for the Classis. During the sacraments exam, Travis West, who is a professor at Western Seminary talked to him about what he likes to call "the spill over" effect of the sacraments. When we come to be baptized, when we come as we will today to the Lord's Table, ordinary elements of water, bread, cup become holy signs of God's presence with us, God's claim on us, of God's sacrificial love for us. Travis asked Yeom, "How do these sacraments spill over into

² G. Porter Taylor, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 326.

ordinary life so that a glass of water or sharing a meal with friends can in some way be reminders for us of these sacraments and of God's life woven into our life?"

What Yeom told us that day, I will never forget. And he has given me permission to share his story with you. When he was first out of high school in Korea he served in the military which was something all young men are required to do. There was a practice (the way of the world) within his unit for those in higher ranking to intimidate, humiliate, and dominate the soldiers who were below them. Yeom did not want to be part of this. He knew that Jesus' blood flowed in him. This is how his Aunt once talked to him about belonging to Jesus. His superiors would beat him up because he refused to abuse his inferiors. They did this every day. He told us that one day when he was taking a shower after suffering a terrible beating, he remembered his baptism, he remembered how Jesus' blood flowed in his body, and every day that he took a shower he recommitted himself to follow God in the way of Jesus no matter what it cost him.

I don't know about you but I want to live like that. I want this water, this bread, this cup to spill over into my life in ways that push me and push us toward a fierce commitment to the ways of God. I want to be engaged and I want our ministry in tangible ways to be connected to the new life that God has for us. This may not require something quite so dramatic as it did for Yeom but it will cost us something. Anything that matters in life usually does.

So as we come to the table - as we partake in the bread and this cup - as you touch the waters of baptism which I encourage you to do before you leave today - remember the invitation to put away the old life and to pledge your allegiance to the light of the world.

After all the blood of Jesus flows in you!

Amen.