

Fruit and Light

Ephesians 5:8-14

As you are aware, most of Paul's letters were in response to a problem or question within the church. Our passage is the answer of how we are to live once we have accepted Christ as savior and submitted to baptism. In fact some commentators believe this is a part of a baptismal service. The reading comes from a passage that earlier began in verses 1 and 2 by telling us, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us." Because of our faith, we are to "live as children of light" (5:8). Therefore what we believe must affect how we deal with our family relationships; how we relate to our bosses and coworkers; and how we confront powers (seen and unseen; understood and those that are mysteries).

Today's reading raises the questions of how actions relate to belief and how one knows what is right. The relevance of these questions is easily seen in current conflicts in church and society over such issues as human sexuality, abortion, war, the death penalty, the role of government, and the like. It is not easy to know what is right.

Central in this difficulty of knowing is the nature of perception. We perceive through filters that come from our personal history and experience, from our education and social relationships, and from our culture. When we look at the world, the mind is not a passive recipient of data. From our reading in psychology we understand that the mind is an active participant in forming and systematizing our perception of reality. We do not perceive reality simply as it is. Rather, the mind actively shapes the data it receives on the basis of certain presuppositions and interests. Knowledge comes from the dialogue between the reality perceived and the mind's preconceptions.

The knowledge and beliefs that emerge from this dialogue then form the preconceptions that filter our perceptions.

At the level of personal values, this process becomes even more complex and more deeply involved in our relationships and history. When we look at ourselves and our actions, objectivity is almost impossible. In the effort to preserve a positive image of self, we rationalize away any actions that seem inappropriate. Out of despair we often see all those actions, thoughts, and desires as assaults on our positive self-evaluation. Thus we begin any reflection on ethics and personal actions with the premise that insights will be filtered to fit our presuppositions and our ego needs.

On Friday night and Saturday I attended a workshop on Diversity and Respect. We discussed the history and affects of institutional racism in the United States, which destroys relationships between those who are oppressed and those who are oppressors. Rev. Hobgood and Rev. Gilmore lovingly lead us through the process and helped us to develop strategies for dismantling this destructive “ism.” Rev. Hobgood also reminded us there are ways to talk constructively that will bring us to positive action steps...where we do more than “lip service” to the issues in our lives that do not bring honor to God.

The use of the metaphor of light points to one way this issue may be addressed. "Everything exposed by the light becomes visible" (v. 13). We are to "live as children of light" (v. 8). Such a spirit of openness can occur only within a healthy community, where growing and learning are taking place. The way to insight and truth is through open dialogue and sharing within the community of faith. Openness and transparency, the ability to discuss without demanding conformity, the strength to be influenced as well as to influence—such characteristics allow truth to emerge. The multiplicity

of perspectives, honestly shared, instructs the individual perspectives, giving a clearer vision of the issue or concern.

In therapy—individual or group—one shares personal stories to receive responses from other perspectives. This wider vision allows the person to see more clearly and begin to grow personally in new ways. In theology and ethics, the gathering and sharing of a diversity of views through assemblies and councils is the means for discovering new insights or reaffirming received truths. Inclusion of many different perspectives is critical if the community is to move toward the truth that has come to us in Jesus Christ.

I remember many years ago I attended several 5-day events where we learned and practiced open communication. I usually cried a great deal during these trainings because we opened doors in my soul that had been forbidden or closed or even hidden for years. However one person shared with me what she had learned in their session. She explained that all of us have blind spots in our lives, which we can only see by honest dialogue and feedback. It is like those mirrors in some women's dressing rooms where you can see yourself at various angles, ones that you don't normally see...like how your ears are not the same size, or one hip is higher than the other or that your face is not shaped the same on both sides....

Another colleague explained that he had attended several of these sessions in his corporate work, but these sessions were different. The critical characteristic of those communities and the church is that they are led by the Spirit of Christ. "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" ([John 16:13](#)). That Spirit above all is a spirit of love. The community led by the Spirit will welcome the stranger and outcast, honor the importance and worth of every member, and provide a culture of

acceptance that invites dialogue. Such a community provides the foundation for the pursuit of truth.

At its best, the worshiping fellowship provides Christians with a re-centering that begins to bring light to our darkness. As we surrender our lives and wills to God, there is a loss of egoism, a destruction of the core of self-concern. Discovering a community of mutual support where a person not only survives but thrives through serving others, we no longer feel threatened and alone. Secure in the knowledge that nothing can separate us from the love of God known through Christ Jesus, though still afraid, we are no longer controlled by fear of the loss of possessions, position, or even life. We remember the story of Jesus and rediscover our identity as children of God, as people who are worth dying for. True worship results in transformed people who act out of genuine concern for others and for doing the will of God. From within the community that honors the dignity of every human being, we are free to listen carefully to the other, free to express our understanding, and free to find the new understanding that somehow bridges the division and moves toward truth.

Humility is the fundamental personal quality required to be part of such a community of mutual concern and openness to truth. Humility is founded on the premise that our basic value rests on our common humanity. Each person is beloved of God and therefore of ultimate worth. Humility provides the foundation for listening to others. Humility empowers one to speak the truth boldly, but always with the reservation that it is the truth as perceived by the individual, not the ultimately correct insight. Humility provides the motivation for patience; through dialogue, in community, with time, truth will emerge, differences will be resolved, and the community will be healed and empowered to move into God's future. This understanding of humility

surely underlies Jesus' statement that the meek will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5) as well as the Pauline reminder that "once you were darkness" (Eph. 5:8a). **Ward B. Ewing**

The author of Ephesians, knew the centrality of the dualism of light and darkness in the writings of the Essenes, a cloistered, eclectic sect active in the author's day. The Essenes considered themselves the elite heirs of an advanced, esoteric knowledge that could flood our inner darkness with the light of awakened consciousness. The Essenes' way of engaging the forces of darkness consisted mainly of huddling in secluded safety to translate life's mysteries into useful knowledge. They pursued their calling far from the cut and thrust of public life. Such was not the case with the writer to the Ephesians. He calls for his followers to take to the streets in the fight with the minions of darkness. Surely he shares the Essenes' call for separation from the "sons of darkness." More importantly, he charges his readers to storm the ramparts of darkness as moral agents in the world: "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them" (v. 11).

Beyond our personal struggles, daily reports on global terrorism, drug wars, poverty, and economic malaise should convince us that we humans, in spite of our professed ethics and ideals, consistently lack the moral muscle to hold back, much less overcome, the forces of evil.

God has chosen us to be light: "now in the Lord you are light" (v. 8). These echoes the words of Jesus to his disciples, recorded in John's account of the Last Supper—"You did not choose me but I chose you" (John 15:16)—as well as his words in Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, "You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). God does something for us. God takes the initiative. Here Ephesians makes the same declaration. God has chosen us to be light in this world.

The writer of Ephesians describes the basic task of being children of light by calling upon us to bear "the fruit of the light" (v. 9). Essentially the text guides us to be the children of light by discerning what is "good and right and true" (v. 9). The major clue to this endeavor is in verse 10: "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord."

We use Christ as the model for a faithful life and a moral life. We honor the distinction between being moralistic—focusing upon obedience to laws, rules, and regulations—and being moral, which seeks a blending of rules and regulations with the dynamic requirements of relationships. We use the community of faith as a community of moral reflection.

As a companion to discerning what is "good and right and true" we are called to resist the works of darkness: "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness." Sometimes we choose darkness without seeing it coming, like the prodigal son. Sometimes we choose darkness even when we try to resist doing so, as Paul explains in Romans 7:15-20. Sometimes we choose darkness hoping somehow the darkness will cover what we have done, as John 3:19 indicates.

The writer takes the matter one big step farther and calls on us to expose the works of darkness. Most of us are reluctant to dare this dimension of living as children of light. It suggests being judgmental and moralistic. Yet there is a great tradition in Christian faith and in the lives of people who have challenged and exposed the works of darkness. Obvious examples are the slave trade and segregation. There are people working now to expose current forms of slavery and human trafficking. It is wonderful that we bring donations to feed the hungry, but we need to be working to understand there are people that are hungry in our land of plenty and help them get a good education, to find work, learn to budget, education their children, have

decent housing, have savings, improve self worth; so how to we help them do these things? For some of us, this Christ-driven boldness may find expression in protesting the redlining practices of a local bank. For others, this new Spirit-driven resolve may come to life in joining the battle against the polluting chemical plant. There are so many social ills that warrant attention: racism, sexism, nationalism, immigration, and the list goes on. Staying neutral contributes to the problem. Choosing innocence over awareness allows injustices to continue. These are the works of darkness that the scripture challenges us to exposed as we practice living as children of light. You and I must be fruit and light to a world that does not know Jesus.

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