

Today we continue our reading through the letter to the Ephesians written by Paul or a close associate of Paul's. It was written to a group of Christians living in the port city of Ephesus along the Aegean Sea.

I will go ahead and give a plug for next week's worship service because we are going to read the most famous or infamous part of this letter about wives submitting, husbands loving their wives, and children obeying their parents. I don't really know at this point how I will handle that passage next week, but you are invited to come and find out.

This week we are going to read a passage from Ephesians which is going to delve into sexual immorality, drunkenness, and foolishness. This may be a passage as difficult as next weeks. But even though the Lectionary skips over these verses we here at Allison Creek will not. We are going to struggle with all parts of this letter.

I am going to call it providential that we are reading this text this morning. I think it is providential that we are reading this text about sexual immorality during the same week that a report was released from the Grand Jury in Pennsylvania about abhorrent sexual abuse among clergy in the Catholic Church. Maybe this passage of Scripture can give us some guidance as we struggle with this very difficult news to hear.

Read Ephesians 5:3-20

We have heard this week the disturbing report of clergy sexual misconduct and abuse. The report documents abuse of over 1,000 children by rape, child pornography, and very sadistic acts of violence by priests. These priests used their positions and authority to lure children into vulnerable situations and took advantage of them.

The church hierarchy, upon hearing these reports and authenticating them, chose to respond by covering up the stories, moving pedophile priest to other parishes, and directing victims to remain silent. The church, a place which is supposed to be a place of comfort and safety, has been a place of evil for many.

My heart breaks for my faithful Catholic friends who gather this week in Mass. I cannot imagine what it must be like for them.

I share that knowing full well that we Protestants are not innocent in all of this. We too have our own stories of sexual misconduct by church pastors and volunteers. A few weeks ago, Bill Hybels, the highly respected and founding pastor of the Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago was forced to resign when multiple women came forward with credible accusations of sexual misconduct.

Many other pastors and other church leaders, including pastors within our Presbyterian denomination, have also had similar credible accusations against them and many church boards have chosen to try to cover it all up. Too many Christians in power have been more concerned by the retention of power and control and reputation than they have been in ministering to the innocent victims and holding the powerful accountable.

At the same time, while many abusers have been shielded by the church hierarchy many innocent victims have also been falsely accused by others. Many of these innocent victims of false accusations have been shunned by the church rather than supported by the church.

So, let's look to what the letter to the Ephesians has to say to all of this. We read in this passage that there must not be "even a hint of sexual immorality among you." This list also includes acts of impurity or greed. Paul goes on to call out his hearers to not express any "obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking which are out of place."

In this text, sexual immorality is defined as adultery or prostitution. With its attachment to greed in this text, we could expand this definition of immorality to anything which is done where one-person forces action upon another.

The misconduct by the Catholic priests as well as coaches, teachers, and any adult against another and especially against children falls into this category as sinful behavior. These acts are sinful and go against God's desire. It is the responsibility of all of us to stand against these acts of abuse.

But Paul in this text goes on to call out a host of other sins. He says that there is no place for obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking. Many of us may have been able to claim innocence to the previous portion of this list but obscene language probably captures many of us.

I am one who must admit that there have been occasions when my attempts at humor have offended others leading me to express sincere apologies for my poor judgment. I am not pure when it comes to obscenity nor claim to be.

But many of us know that we now live during a period in our history when our language toward one another and about one another is becoming more and more harsh and vulgar. We post very harsh and degrading words about one another on social media and it has become the social norm to use vulgar language from high school students all the way to the White House.

So, do we lament how awful we have become in terms of our language and sexual ethics? We can. But we also need to find healthy responses as well. Courtney Martin writes an article entitled, "A Couple of Truths About Adulthood That No One Tells You."

In the article she states there are 2 things about adulthood that she has learned. The first is that "Adults do not have their stuff together... Even the really successful ones." She uses a different word than stuff but since Paul chastises his listeners for their vulgar language I am going to go with stuff here. Adults do not have their stuff together.

And we really don't. We think impure thoughts. We act in impure ways. We say impure words. Paul acknowledges in this text that we get drunk and that leads to debauchery. We recognize that about ourselves, but we can also make commitments to do better.

As Paul says, rather than foolish or coarse or vulgar talk, we can express thanksgiving. Rather than greed toward others we can learn to express care and concern. Rather than drunkenness we can be filled with the Spirit.

Paul says that once we were darkness but that now we are the light in the Lord. Live as children of light and discover what pleases the Lord.

We do not have to accept or participate in vulgar talk. We do not have to accept sexual immorality like adultery. We do not have to accept people in power using vulgar and degrading terms to describe another. If we are living in the Lord, then we are living in the light and not in darkness.

The second observation that Martin makes in her article is that organizations are riddled with problems. In other words, they don't have their stuff together either.

It is shameful what has been done to children and adults in the church, both Catholic and Protestant. It is sinful. But rather than abandon the church we seek to reform it. We call out abuse when we see it especially by those in power and we express our own sorrow when we contribute to the problems.

We are broken and sinful people who have built broken and sinful institutions like the church. But we seek to be faithful to God and be agents of light and transformation.

And as Paul says, as we seek to be the light rather than the darkness, we always give thanks to God for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

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-Martin, Courtney, <https://onbeing.org/blog/courtney-martin-a-couple-of-truths-about-adulthood-that-no-one-tells-you/>

-Given: August 19, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)