

Connected to One Another
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Fourth Sunday of Lent, 3-22-2020
Ephesians 5:8-14

There's a popular form of blessing, by which we offer thanksgiving for all the hands that have gone into preparing the meal we are about to eat. We can think of bread, for instance, and the number of hands involved in the process from creation-to-table is astounding. Yes, there's the baker who has kneaded the dough, and placed it in a warm oven. But there are also the farmers who have tilled the soil and planted and harvested the grains that make up its ingredients; the logistics and transportation specialists who delivered all the raw materials to make the final ingredients; administrators who have managed the commerce involved in distributing loaves of bread; even the grocery store clerk who processes the transaction. And then of course, there are those in the household who take time to serve the bread, and prepare a table, and those who will clean up after the meal. In something as simple as acknowledging the bread we eat, we are instantly reminded of our mutual dependence upon one another – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called this phenomenon an “inescapable network of mutuality,” saying that “whatever affects one [person] directly, affects all [persons] indirectly.”

The COVID-19 crisis is like something out of a movie. It has elements of natural disasters we have faced in the past, but there's something new, too. There is a permanence and a totality, because the virus is affecting everyone, everywhere. And I can't think of an event that has, or will ever again, reveal with such certainty, our mutual dependence upon one another.

We are faced with a grim reality, Paul might call it a darkness: we are called to care for one another, but the systems we have in place to offer such care, are failing to offer care.

We cling to systems: We rely on the service and hospitality industries to feed us, and supply us, and enjoy conveniences; we rely on the healthcare industry to keep us well; we rely on educators to love, train, and empower our young people;

we rely on countless organizations and agencies to do all the unnoticed things that help keep us safe and unsuspecting.

But what happens when our routines are interrupted, and we can no longer take care of the very people who take care of us? What happens, when in our efforts to preserve our future, we disrupt our present?

This is where we find ourselves this morning. In today's lesson, the author of Ephesians offers good counsel, counsel we should listen to.

First, there is a reminder: "You were darkness." The reminder is not that *there was darkness*, but that *we were darkness*. And such a phrase conjures up lots of images. In creation, there was in the beginning, or I suppose prior to the beginning, a kind of boggy nothingness. And John would tell us, prior to Jesus, the light of the world, there was something missing, a darkness. I think more than anything, this darkness was (and still can be) a dependence on things that aren't God. After all, if even my money tells me that Caesar is God, are not his systems the end all, be all, too?!?

"But," the author tells us, "Now in the Lord, you are light." Not *near light*. Not *exposed to light*. *You are light*. So hear that verse again: "*Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.*" In creation, God ended the boggy nothingness with one sweeping creative act: "Let there be light! And there was light!!!" And in response to Rome's callousness, Jesus ended a dark way of thinking, living, and acting, by reminding us that we are light, not to mention, being salty, as well. Jesus didn't say "love everyone who is a Roman citizen," Jesus said, "love your neighbor," and then he set about offering us the most expansive definition of neighbor we could imagine.

Once we were darkness, but now in the Lord, we are light!!! Thanks be to God!!!

The author goes on to tell us that those who seek to live in the light will find the fruit of what's good and true. And I would ask you this morning, as you sit in social distancing, the world stilled from its busy-ness, what have you noticed to be good and true? Has this pause offered any chance to reflect on things in your life that bring you relational rather than transactional value? Is the bread you consume a

reflection of thanksgiving for all who help sustain you, or is bread simply a token, or a vehicle to be gobbled up and consumed?

I think the author is telling us, that through the lenses of Christ's teachings, that is through light, real light, we have been made aware of what has real value and real truth, and what bears good fruit. When we recognize the dignity and value of ourselves and of our neighbors, all of which is grounded in God our Creator, we begin to recognize what is good and true. We gain an independence in God that frees us from a dependence on Caesar's systems.

But when we become light, we also notice the effects of darkness. I think all of us, on some level, resonate with the teachings of Jesus. Goodness. Charity. Empathy. Discipline. Truth. Love. Justice. We want all of these things, especially, when we can have them in a vacuum. It's just that when we step out of our bubble, or vacuum, these teachings become hard work.

What the life of Jesus does, is to show us how futile, how flimsy our dependence on systems are. In other words, by being light, Jesus also illumines the dangers of darkness.

If we are light, that is, if we are people who love God and love neighbor, then we are people who genuinely care about the real needs of others. Our current crisis illumines the darkness and forces us to think about how we can be light.

Is this a time to hoard our resources, or if we're in situations of privilege, protect our status quo? What happens, when the systems we are seeking to protect, are the very things that cause the most long-term damage and harm to our neighbors?

Nobody would ever claim that the Roman empire kept a pleasant peace, or an equal peace, or even a fair peace, but it did keep a certain peace. Jesus revealed the hypocrisy of a system that marginalized so many. And Jesus pointed to the urgency of light. There cannot be life in God, if God's people choose dependence on darkness, rather than independence in light.

In today's crisis, there's a fragile peace to be kept – the Dow needs to be higher; the interest rates need to be lower; the budget's got to keep flowing; the

infrastructure's got to keep humming; and the airlines, the cruiselines, the banks, and the builders, the employers, the investors, all of the haves, have got to be made whole. And too often, making the haves whole, means making the have-nots halved (if they are lucky!), but more than likely empty.

It's happening on a household level, too. We're hoarding cleaning supplies and toilet paper, removing cash, shoring up assets, taking precautions, ensuring our tomorrows, all while we ignore, sometimes consciously, sometimes subconsciously, our neighbors who are drowning in the present. It sure seems like we're flailing around in the hopes of maintaining a flimsy, uncertain peace. We're eager to give away the independence we can find in God, for the predictable dependence we find in Caesar's systems.

But that's the thing about God's light. Being exposed to light transforms us. We see light, we know light, we live light, eventually, we become light. Jesus exposed darkness to light, and not only did the darkness not overcome come it, the darkness became light.

In these uncertain times, it seems to me, we have the opportunity to reshape our world, to reprioritize our lives, to reimagine how we can be neighbors to one another. I think we have the possibility to become aware of all those things that sustain us, and to live in such a way, that our lives become a source of thanksgiving for such sustaining light.

What can we give up today, in order that both we AND our neighbors thrive tomorrow? Where do we notice that we're darkness, and how can we let God's light expose that darkness, in order that it might become light? Where might we find spaces where we can be confident in seeking God's peace rather than Rome's?

Today's text doesn't tell us the task is easy. Today's text doesn't absolve us from our responsibilities helping to mend and sustain God's creation. But today's text does affirm us. It tells us, we are light. And it reminds us that our flickering, sometimes flimsy and clumsy, and sometimes even selfish and imperfect light, is held, sustained, buoyed, empowered by God's grace.

Maybe the systems of this world have lulled you to sleep; maybe we've been buried in the transactional nature of this world. It's okay, because the light of Christ is seeping in, shining even, and we can be change. Listen to the hymn:

Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.

Here's how I see it. We have the opportunity to be a new creation.

In the boggy nothingness of COVID-19, somewhere in the midst of our Netflix trance, God's light is seeping in. And we hear a commanding, empowering voice: "Let there be light."

Such a voice is an affirming call to action by God to us.

If we dare to be exposed to such a call, there is a promising response:

And there was light!!!

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.