

**Date: Sunday August 16, 2009**

**Scripture: Ephesians 5:15-20**

**Title: “Questions and . . . “**

**The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Paul tells us how to live as filled by the Spirit.**

**The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): Questions are good for the growth and nurture of our faith. That can also be a sign of Spirit. Let us ask.**

**(Remember, it’s all about God!)**

As seen on an outdoor sign, “If you are having trouble sleeping, don’t count sheep, talk to the shepherd” (A Laugh a Day). I share that today because we are going to do some talking about talking to the shepherd today and we are going to talk to the shepherd.

Reverend William Willimon writes that since there are not any references to the city of Ephesus in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians - a portion of which we read and heard here today - scholars have doubted that this letter was actually addressed to the Ephesians. But whether it was intended for the Ephesians is really not important. The important part is that the letter was written to a church that was experiencing great difficulty. In that regard it could be a letter written to the church at Ephesus or the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In the letter there are two commands that stand out. First, don’t get drunk and filled with the spirit. The key here is to recognize that Paul writes of spirit with a small “s,” that spirit associated with wine. Second Paul follows with a command that includes four actions of what it means to be filled with the Spirit, key here

being capital “S,” that Spirit associated with God. The four actions Paul highlights are speaking, singing, thanking, and submitting to the Lord. Paul implies that the only way to properly speak, sing, thank, and submit to the Lord is through the Power of the Holy Spirit.

Today we are going to focus on thanking God. Paul indicates that he is writing this letter from a jail cell and he awaits execution. Some of the Ephesians paid the price of faith in blood (Willimon). We all encounter tough times as children of God. These three examples all raise the question, can we always, as the scripture states, “give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:20)?” Aren’t there just times too tough to do that? We’ll make those questions one and two for today.

Reverend Willimon shares a story about sitting on the back porch of the home of a church member. The two men sat there one afternoon watching the sun set. As they sat there, Reverend Willimon was looking over the church member’s yard and was thinking how small and lacking it looked. Then the church member said, “Pastor, I sit here some afternoons like today and just give thanks to God for such a blessing.” “Blessing,” Reverend Willimon asked himself? “What did I say that he would think of as a blessing? He must just enjoy my company. I should probably come and visit more often.” Then the man continued. “Yes, I am blessed to have my wonderful home, my beautiful yard, and this glorious day. You know, I grew up dirt poor. My family had nothing. I never dreamed that one day I would be able to live like I live today (Willimon). This is all so great. God is so good.” The man

was thankful to God for the abundance that he knew he had.

That man's thankfulness reminded me of a college experience. It was nearing the end of my first two years of college. I attended a community college in Creston, a school very similar to State Fair. I would graduate in the spring with an Associate of Arts degree. At least that was the plan. One of the classes I was taking that last semester wasn't going so well. The class was abnormal psychology. I know some of you are thinking that was a class where I should excel. Well, you might be right. I had hoped to as I had and continued to have a strong interest in psychology. But the instructor and I had a good old fashioned personality conflict. Although I have to say he and I got along OK when I took the intro class to psychology. The difference might have been that a friend and I sat in the back of the abnormal psyche class and were more interested in trying to make each other laugh than pay attention to the instructor. The difference might have been that I was not applying myself to the assignments and the exams to the extent that I could have applied myself. The difference might have been that the first psyche class was in the first semester of school and this class was the last semester of school and I had spring and graduation fever and had it bad. Those three things might have played a part in the personality conflict. Anyway, I had serious concerns that I might not pass the class. Now the final assignment was to bring in a guest speaker to speak on any topic connected with abnormal psychology. So, with the instructor's permission, I had our family attorney talk to the class about using an insanity plea in a court of law. The presentation went very well.

A girl that I had dated served as the psych instructor's student assistant. We got together for drinks one night. I asked her how things were looking for me with the psych grade. She replied that the instructor had told her that he was prepared to flunk me in the class, but the presentation from the family attorney had gone so well that he was going to give me a "D." A "D", I was ecstatic. Now some people that I shared this with couldn't understand how I would be so excited over a "D". I explained that if I failed, I wouldn't graduate, and a "D" meant that I would be walking and would get my diploma. For me, at the moment, it was a blessing, and I was grateful. I do have a slightly different perspective on that situation today and students of any age, I do not recommend striving for and or being satisfied with a "D". But the situation as it was in 1983 brought me thankfulness. It is one more example of how our particular perspective, that perhaps only we see, can generate thanksgiving.

We gather here as folks living with various circumstances and issues in our own lives. Yet, we come together here to give thanks and praise to God no matter the burdens we carry, the fears we know, or the feelings we face. It is our faith in God that gives us the strength to persevere when it seems like we can't go on. This is the place we gather together to celebrate that faith and we do that in a number of ways including speaking and singing to the Lord.

One way that we don't normally celebrate our faith right here is by asking questions. Yet, questions can help our faith to grow. We are able to nurture our faith by asking questions. So today, we take a few moments to ask questions about

faith, about God, about church, about scripture readings, or issues we face in society that connect with faith. I'll say this, there aren't always answers to questions, at least immediate answers, but that doesn't mean we should not ask. So with thanksgiving for the opportunity to ask, please ask. I am going to begin with this question I have received.

After the questions:

Back to questions one and two that I raised earlier. Can we always give thanks to God at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ? The answer to that is yes. Second, aren't there just times too tough to do that? There is no question we face tough times. Yet no matter what we face, we can give thanks for God's presence with us. I asked a few weeks ago in a sermon, does God intentionally lead us into stormy waters. The answer is no. But God certainly leads us when we are in stormy waters and for that we can give thanks.

It seems to me there are at least two kinds of people in the world. There are those who consider that their lives are their achievements and that what comes to them is that which is owed to them by the world for what they have achieved and earned. And those seem to be the ones who think nothing is ever enough. And before we start thinking of everybody we know like that, I will say we all have some of that in us.

Then there are those who believe that life, no matter what comes with it, is a gift. Those folks know that through it all, no matter what, God is with us and God's presence is the greatest gift and that gift is made possible only by the generosity and grace of God. It is these folks that we can call Christians – those who give thanks to God, who are filled by the Spirit – capital S – and who follow Jesus Christ. We all have some of that in us, too. And so for the faith that we have, for the strength that comes from faith, for the opportunity to ask questions and grow our faith, and for the eternal presence of God, we do give thanks to God this very day. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Dear Shepherd,

We offer our thanks to you. Events don't always happen the way we want them to or order them to, in fact, rarely, does life happen according to our plans. Yet, through it all, somehow we are reminded that you are present with us providing a place to cling to, a path to follow, and a beacon of hope in the dark of the night; for all you do and all you provide that we may or may not realize, we give you our thanks. And for those sleepless nights, we thank you for that extra time to pray and to listen for you. We offer this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Offering: We often come to the time of offering a bit grudgingly, "Why is the church always asking for money?" Today I suggest we come to the time of offering thankfully, remembering all that we are blessed with and what we have to give. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Lord, accept and bless this offering that we give thankfully, on behalf of all the gifts

that we are given and have available to share. So we pray, Amen.

Benediction: So we go forth, blessed by God and made more holy, loving, and like Jesus. We go forth giving thanks to God. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

A Laugh a Day – A Daily Dose of Heavenly Humor; Gift Books of Hallmark: Kansas City, MO; 2009.

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Willimon, William; Pulpit Resource; Logos Productions: Inver Grove Heights, MN; 2008.