

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Alleluia People: Audacious Dreams”  
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Psalms 105:1-6; Ephesians 5:6-20

We continue our sermon series on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and the way that the Risen Christ r transforms us into God’s Alleluia people. This selection from Chapter 5, if read only by itself, can make Paul seem like a real spoil sport. But we need to first consider the overall themes of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians where his upbeat energy and enthusiasm shine forth.

Throughout Ephesians Paul stresses that believers have a new life in Christ. He contrasts the old life with the new life. Or, as our young people so eloquently proclaimed last week, we can be that Light in a world full of darkness. In Chapters 4-6 Paul outlines certain standards of conduct so that his beloved people can be that Spirit-filled community that brings God’s power and loving presence to the world.

So it’s in this context that we turn to Ephesians 5:6-20:

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be associated with them. For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

‘Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.’

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

At the ending of her life, Jenny Bone gave me a profound life-giving lesson. I was serving as Associate Pastor at St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church in Livonia. I drove over to a nursing home to serve Communion with one of the longtime members. Jenny was in a hospital bed with all her earthly possessions in one of the metal cabinets along the wall. She had lost just about everything—her family was gone; her possessions were depleted, and her health was failing. She was lying on her side with one hand grasping the protective metal side bar of her bed. We visited a bit. Then we began to share in Holy Communion. And in the middle of our sacrament, Jenny declared in her wonderful Scottish Brogue, “Ah, God is good.”

Pow! Here was a person who could have felt sorry for herself and complained about all sorts of things. But her focus was on God and the gifts of God. In spite of everything in her immediate circumstances, it was as if she were tuned into a different channel—a life-giving channel that gave such a message of joy, hope, and peace. Being with her was like being on Holy Ground.

Jenny taught me that we can often choose which channels of messages we hear, just like being able to switch channels using the remote controls of our televisions or to which radio station you listen. She taught me to notice to what frequency of messages was I listening or playing in my own head.

Throughout the Bible we are invited to switch channels and tune into those things that lift our souls and spirits. How can we do this? Psalm 105 inspires us to give thanks to God. To praise God, claiming that “God IS good.” The transforming power of giving thanks helps us to rise above our usually self-absorbed or negative, destructive thinking to marvel at God’s marvelous deeds. Such practices are life-giving clues to a sense of abundant living no matter what our circumstances or what has happened to us or what we’ve done.

In Ephesians 5 Paul sets up the ways people can change those channels of non-productive living. In a way he’s asking, “Why settle for less when you can tune into God’s love in action in the here and now?” He exhorts people not to listen to negative, false messages, but to lift our sights and to tune in to what is pleasing to God. He says to wake up to grasp the abundance of life all around. Paul says that we don’t need to get high with lots of alcoholic drinks or other mind-altering drugs—but can get high on the Holy Spirit.

He goes on to give more timely suggestions. Tune into some of your favorite the psalms like Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need.” And what about choosing to sing to yourself some favorite hymns as you go through your day? Make melody to the Lord in your hearts. Like, as we drive along, why not marvel at the colors bursting forth all around us?

“Give thanks,” Paul writes, “to God at all times and for everything in the name of Jesus Christ.” In doing so, we live out our calling as Alleluia People, A Life-Giving Community.

We are so fortunate in that we are surrounded by many Alleluia people here at this church. Last week our high schoolers led us in worshipping God. And doesn’t it make your heart glad to see so many kids rush down for the children’s message each week? Our inclusion ministries are life giving. Have you been to one of the Rejoicing Spirits services yet? Over 60 people come from all over to share through songs, scriptures and their prayers, and you get a tremendous sense that “God is good.”

I’ve had the opportunity to meet many life-giving people through our Foster/Adoption Families Partnerships and the Faith Communities Coalition on Foster Care. When people come together from various organizations and agencies devoted to the welfare of our most vulnerable and invisible children, you get a sense of being part of a strong community of God’s love in action.

I’ve gotten to be with so many Alleluia people. If I began to share some of these stories, we’d be here until the tremendously inspiring concert at 5:00 tonight! And doesn’t this entire choir and music program under the direction of Andrew lift your spirits???

So, here’s the challenge for today: Reflect back on your past 24 hours. Take a deep, calming breath and invite the Spirit to call to mind whatever has happened that brought you a sense of love or joy since yesterday morning to this morning.

Some of these may have been gone un-noticed at the time. Let yourselves pay attention to them especially during Holy Communion. The more you become aware of those life-giving moments, the more these can flow through you to others.

And, as you participate in Communion, also known as The Eucharist, which means Thanksgiving, remember that “God is good. God is so good.”

Thanks be to God in whom we live and move and have our being. Alleluia and amen.