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**Pentecost 12 with reading from Pentecost 11  
Ephesians 5**

**15 August 2021  
Salem, Bridgeport**

**“The WAY to Abundant Life”**

We've been working our way through the book of Ephesians and today we've reached chapter 5 of 6, but it occurred to me and my colleagues in our pastors' text study this week that perhaps we've neglected to set the context properly.

There is a fundamental difference, you see, between the early church and the church of today. The church that Jesus founded and the church that Paul was sent to grow and the entire early church was completely different from what we know as church in our lives.

Anyone want to hazard a guess as to that main difference?

Or, can anyone tell me what year the church changed most profoundly?

(And, no, it wasn't 1517 with Martin Luther and the Reformation!)

Ok. I'll give you a clue: The year was 313. Anyone know what happened then?

The Emperor Constantine made Christianity legal. Christianity became the religion of the empire.

The early Church was a movement; after 313 the Church became an institution.

The early Church was counter-cultural, actively opposed to culture;

the institutional Church was part of culture, and so promoted or at least adapted to culture.

And here is probably the most important difference of all:

***the early church was about how you lived; the institutional church became about what you believed.***

Let me say that again:

***the early church was about how you lived; the institutional church became about what you believed.***

Now I'm pretty sure that all of us grew up in the institutional church,

and that's what we were taught – that it was all about what we believe.

That's why we were sent to Sunday School and Confirmation Class – so that we could learn what to believe.

We were told that if we believed the right things –

the Creed, the 10 Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the other teachings of Luther's Small Catechism – we would receive eternal life and go to heaven to live with God forever.

But the truth is, saying the creed and believing what it says

is NOT going to get you to heaven and it's NOT going to lead you to the abundant life Jesus offers.

And when you think about it, trying to encapsulate the infinity of a transcendent God into a few sentences is pretty absurd.

In fact, anytime we try to define God or explain God or even describe God, we end up putting God in a box; and as soon as we've put God in a box, what we have in the box is no longer God!

We were taught that it's all about what we believe, but that is not what Jesus taught.

Jesus taught that one finds abundant life here on earth and eternal life in heaven by following him, the One who said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”.

The early Christians were not called Christians. Anyone know what they were called?

That's right; they were called “Followers of The Way”.

And that Way that they lived was completely different from the way other people lived.

It was not about an institution, it was not about following a set of rules, it was not about believing a set of principles.

Rather it was all about having an intimate relationship with Christ that completely transformed their lives. That relationship became so foundational that they wouldn't give it up at any cost.

And they were willing to be imprisoned or even to die because the relationship meant that much to them.

***And that's the reason Paul is always focused on how to live.***

***It's all about out how Jesus called us back to loving God with all our hearts and minds and souls and bodies and to loving our neighbors as ourselves.***

***It's all about how to live in right relationship with God and one another.***

So how do we do that? Ephesians 5 gives us at least 4 ways.

1. Be imitators of God. Now how do we do that?

Well you can't learn to imitate someone by reading about them.

You can't learn to imitate someone by hearing about them.

You have to be able to see them and hear them for yourself.

I've been going to voice lessons as a follow-up to my speech therapy.

And sometimes my voice teacher, Kristin Huffman, will say something like,

"That sounds too far back. Bring it forward".

I'll try it again and she will say "No, that's not it. Farther forward."

And I'll try it again and I still won't get it.

And then she'll say, "Listen to me. This is how you sound now. And this is how I want you to sound."

And she'll sing again.

And all of the sudden I can hear the difference! And I can imitate her!

And I can sing more like the person I would like to sing like.

It's the same thing with God.

We can't imitate God simply by reading about or hearing about or studying about God.

We've got to be able to see God and hear God and experience God for ourselves in order to imitate God.

And the way we get to see God and hear God and experience God is by spending time with God,

waiting and learning to spot God and catch sight of God –

just like people learn to wait and learn in to catch sight of a particular bird.

And the way we get to hear God is by listening for God's voice.

How much of our prayer time involves us talking & how much of it involves us listening to God speaking?

I had an interesting experience last Saturday.

There are some things that I've asked God for that I believe God wants to give me at some time in the future,

but for some reason on Saturday I was feeling impatient and so in my prayer I said,

"God, I'm tired of waiting. I want it now!"

I was kind of like a kid in November saying I want my Christmas present now!

I didn't hear anything at first – probably because I wasn't listening! –

but a while later I was driving and all of the sudden I heard God say

"Are you sure you want it now? I mean think about what that would mean...."

So I started thinking about everything that would have to happen before I got what I wanted

and I ended up saying, "I guess I don't want it now after all. You're right, God. It's not time yet."

And then God said, "You know, you're acting like a woman who is only three months pregnant but says,

'I want the baby now!'"

And I laughed and said "Yeh, that would be pretty stupid, wouldn't it, God?"

Some things take time. And you're the one who knows when the best time is."

So to become imitators of God we need to spend time with God, watching & listening to & experiencing God.

So Paul says,

1. Be imitators of God; and

2. Don't be drunk on wine but be drunk with the Spirit.

What does it mean to be drunk? To have consumed an excess.

To have consumed so much that it alters one's perceptions, one's feelings, even one's judgment. People often get drunk because there's an emptiness, a lack, a dark hole inside, because there is hurt and pain that needs to be filled.

Drinking alcohol, however, only covers up the hole, the lack, the pain temporarily.

But being filled with the Spirit doesn't just cover up the emptiness temporarily; it fills it permanently.

Being filled with the Spirit means being filled with the fruits of the spirit –

love and joy, peace and patience, goodness and kindness and gentleness, and self-control.

And being drunk with the Spirit means having all of those things in excess, in abundance.

I don't know about you

but when I'm with people who are talking about the amazing things God has done in their lives, such people do seem slightly inebriated.

They are just so full of joy and excitement that they can't keep it to themselves.

I think that should be our goal this week: to get so excited about God that someone accuses us of being drunk!

1. Be imitators of God; 2. Be drunk with the Spirit; & 3. Give thanks to God at ALL times & for EVERYTHING.

Think about that one for a minute! Give thanks to God for everything???

I used to only give God thanks for the good things, for the successes, for the answered prayers.

But after my conversation with God last Saturday,

I started giving God thanks for NOT answering my prayers right away!

We can also thank God for our failures.

I have a friend who was out in California visiting her sister.

Her sister has not been functioning well emotionally & she got so she told my friend she'd have to leave.

It was a terrible fight and my friend felt guilty for her part in it.

But not only did they get through it, it seemed to have gotten her sister to a better place somehow.

And so now my friend is thanking God for the stupid thing she had done that had started the fight that had ended with her sister finding some healing!

We need to thank God not only for our blessings but for our challenges,

not only for the prayers God has answered but for those God has not,

not only for what God has already done, but for what God is in the middle of doing,

as well as for the things that God is going to do.

1. Be imitators of God; 2. Be drunk with the Spirit; 3. Give thanks to God at all times for everything, and 4. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

And that's perhaps the hardest one – so the only thing I'm going to say about that is this:

concentrate on the other 3 and this one will follow.

Because it's as we learn to imitate God that we are enlightened as to how to be subject to one another.

It's as we become drunk with the Spirit that we are empowered to be subject to one another.

It's as we give thanks to God at all times for everything that we are enabled to become subject to one another.

So be imitators of God, be drunk with the Spirit, give thanks to God at all times and for everything.

It's not about what you believe; it's about how you live.

And how you live is not about what you do, but who you know.

The Way, the Truth, and the Life is found in Jesus – and not in knowing about Jesus, but in actually knowing Jesus.

The secret to entering eternal life in heaven and the secret to experiencing abundant life here on earth

is found not in what you believe but in how you live –  
how you live in daily relationship with Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Enjoy your time with God this week!

And give me a call and let me know what you see and what you hear and what you experience.

Because I'm pretty sure that when we start talking together about what God is up to,

we're going to be filled with so much joy that we will be drunk in the Spirit!

And then we can really and truly give God thanks for Jesus, the Way to the most abundant life we can imagine.

Amen