

Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

AS I READ AND RE-READ THE WORDS FROM EPHESIANS, THE EXPRESSION THAT STRUCK ME AS PUZZLING WAS: “DO NOT GRIEVE THE HOLY SPIRIT OF GOD.” HOW DO YOU GRIEVE THE HOLY SPIRIT?

REMINDED ME OF THE STORY ABOUT A CERTAIN CHURCH THAT WOULD REGULARLY HOLD REVIVAL MEETINGS EVERY COUPLE OF MONTHS. AT EACH REVIVAL THERE WOULD BE A MAN WHO WOULD ALWAYS COME FORWARD FOR THE ALTAR CALL. KNEELING BEFORE THE ALTAR HE WOULD CRY OUT, “FILL ME, JESUS! FILL ME!” HE WOULD LEAVE THE ALTAR AGLOW WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT, BUT BEFORE LONG THE GLOW WOULD FADE AND INVARIABLY THE MAN WOULD RETURN TO A RATHER PUBLIC DISPLAY OF SINNING. NONETHELESS HE WOULD BE SURE TO SHOW UP AT THE NEXT REVIVAL MEETING, COMING FORWARD FOR THE ALTAR CALL, ONCE AGAIN CRYING OUT, “FILL ME, JESUS! FILL ME!” ONLY TO DEPART AGAIN TO BACKSLIDE ONCE MORE INTO HIS LIFE OF SIN.

IT CAME TO PASS THAT YET ANOTHER REVIVAL MEETING WAS HELD, AND THE MAN ONCE MORE RESPONDED TO THE CALL TO GIVE HIS LIFE OVER TO JESUS, CRYING OUT, “FILL ME, JESUS! FILL ME!” THIS TIME ANOTHER CRY CAME OUT, THIS TIME FROM THE BACK OF THE CONGREGATION: “DON’T DO IT, JESUS! HE LEAKS!”

WHEN YOU HAVE A MOMENT WHEN THE GRACE OF GOD IS EXPERIENCED IN SUCH A WAY THAT THE LOVE OF CHRIST BECOMES VERY REAL, COAXING YOU TO LET GO OF THE TIGHT REINS WITH WHICH YOU’VE BEEN HOLDING ONTO YOUR LIFE, THE HOLY SPIRIT IS GIVEN ROOM TO COME INTO YOUR HEART IN SUCH A WAY THAT A SWEET INTIMACY IS SHARED. IF AFTERWARDS YOU ONCE MORE TAKE BACK THE REINS OF YOUR LIFE AND GO YOUR OWN WAY, THE HOLY SPIRIT IS GRIEVED.

NOW IT IS IMPORTANT TO KEEP IN MIND WHO PAUL IS DIRECTING HIS WORDS. HE IS NOT SPEAKING TO THE WORLD. NOR IS HE SPEAKING TO INDIVIDUALS, THOUGH THAT’S HOW WE GENERALLY HEAR HIS WORDS...WHAT DO THEY MEAN FOR ME. NO, PAUL IS SPEAKING TO

CHURCHES---TO COMMUNITIES OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT, HAVING MADE THEIR COMMITMENT TO FOLLOW HIM.

WHEN YOU REALIZE THIS, IT MEANS THAT IN THE STORY OF THE MAN WHO REPEATEDLY ENDS UP BACKSLIDING AND GRIEVING THE HOLY SPIRIT, A LARGE PART OF THE BLAME FOR HIS LEAKAGE HAS TO BE ADDRESSED TO THE CHURCH, FOR FAILING TO PROVIDE THE MAN WITH THE KIND OF COMMUNITY IN WHICH HE COULD BE SUSTAINED AND ENCOURAGED IN THE PATH THAT LEADS TO LIFE.

JOHN WESLEY, THE FOUNDER OF THE MOVEMENT THAT CAME TO BE KNOWN AS METHODISTS ONCE SAID THAT IF YOU LEAD A PERSON TO AN ENCOUNTER WITH CHRIST AND HIS LOVE, ALLOWING HIM TO TASTE THE BLESSED FREEDOM OF NEW BIRTH, ONLY TO DROP HIM AFTERWARDS LIKE A LEAD BALLOON, LEAVING HIM TO FEND FOR HIMSELWF, THEN WHAT YOU'RE DOING IS "RAISING UP CHILDREN FOR THE DEVIL." THE POINT BEING, THAT INVARIABLY THE INITIAL EXHILARATION OF A CONVERSION WILL INEVITALLY DIMINISH SOME OVER TIME, AND WITHOUT THE SUPPORT AND COUNSEL OF A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, THE PULL OF THE WORLD WILL BE TOO STRONG, LEADING TO DESPAIR AND EVENTUALLY A CERTAIN HARDHEARTED CYNICISM, AS IN, "I TRIED JESUS ONCE, BUT IT DIDN'T LAST."

PAUL'S WORDS ARE FOR EACH OF US, CONGREGATIONS WHO CONTINUE TO MOVE FORWARD ON THE PATH THAT LEADS TO LIFE. PAUL REMINDS US THAT WE ARE "MEMBERS OF ONE ANOTHER." WHAT FITTING WORDS FOR TODAY. ALTHOUGH WE REPRESENT 3 INDIVIDUAL CONGREGATIONS, WE ARE MEMBERS OF ONE ANOTHER IN CHRIST. WE ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST. WE ARE CONNECTED TO ONE ANOTHER THE SAME WAY ARMS AND LEGS ARE AS PART OF ONE BODY.

THE HOPE OF THE WORLD AS PAUL SEES IT IS THAT WE THE CHURCH WILL LIVE UP TO OUR CALLING TO TRULY BE THE BODY OF CHRIST. WE ARE TO LIVE TOGETHER, REGARDLESS OF DENOMINATIONAL DIFFERENCES, IN THIS WORLD IN SUCH A WAY THAT WHEN THE WORLD SEES US, THEY WILL CATCH A GLIMPSE OF THE GRACE OFFERED IN JESUS.

PAUL GIVES PRACTICAL ADVICE IN REGARD TO THIS NEW LIFE TOGETHER...BECAUSE AS HUMAN BEINGS WE ALWAYS HAVE WORK TO DO. SPEAKING THE TRUTH TO OUR

NEIGHBORS AS WE PUT AWAY FALSEHOODS. FALSEHOODS..NOT SPREADING RUMORS OR TALKING BEHIND PEOPLE'S BACKS. SHARING WHAT WE MAKE WITH THE NEEDY. THE WORLD TELLS US THAT WE MAKE MONEY TO INCREASE OUR STANDARD OF LIVING. NO, PAUL SAYS. IT IS SO WE WILL HAVE SOMETHING TO HELP FOLKS WHO NEED HELP. WE ARE TO PUT AWAY ALL BITTERNESS AND WRATH AND ANGER, TOGETHER WITH SLANDER AND MALICE. PAUL INSTRUCTS US TO BE KIND TO ONE ANOTHER, TENDERHEARTED, FORGIVING. WE ARE TO BE IMITATORS OF GOD AND TO LIVE IN LOVE AS CHRIST LOVED US. LOVE EXTRAVAGANTLY!

WE ARE MEMBERS OF ONE ANOTHER. I'VE DISCOVERED THAT RURAL CONGREGATIONS ARE HIGHLY RELATIONAL AND THEIR CONNECTED NATURE IS A TRUE STRENGTH. RURAL CONGREGATIONS ARE OFTEN OVERLOOKED. NEWS ARTICLES ON RELIGION FOCUS EITHER ON MEGA CHURCHES OR CONGREGATIONS THAT ARE CLOSING.

RURAL CONGREGATIONS' HIGHLY RELATIONAL AND CONNECTED NATURE CAN BE THEIR STRENGTH AND A SOURCE OF CHALLENGES. IT'S EASY TO FALL PREY TO WHAT PAUL WARNS AGAINST. IF DIFFERENCES OF OPINION ARISE, WE CAN FEEL THREATENED. WHEN OUR SMALL COMMUNITIES ARE STRESSED OR STRAINED DUE TO DECLINE, OR LOCAL POLITICS, OUR CONGREGATIONS ARE INEVITABLY DRAWN INTO THESE DYNAMICS. BUT WHEN RELATIONSHIPS ARE STRONG, COMMUNITIES ARE HARMONIOUS, AND CONGREGATIONS ARE UNIFIED IN ITS MISSION AND ENERGY, THEY MAKE AN IMPACT THAT STRETCHES FAR BEYOND THOSE GATHERED TO WORSHIP EACH WEEK.

RURAL CONGREGATIONS ARE CORNERSTONES OF THEIR COMMUNITIES. THEY ADD MUCH MORE TO THE WELL-BEING OF THEIR NEIGHBORS THAN PEOPLE REALIZE. RURAL CONGREGATIONS ARE A DEFENSE AGAINST LONELINESS AND DISCONNECTION FROM THOSE WHO LIVE FAR FROM NEIGHBORS. RURAL CONGREGATIONS LIVE INTO PAUL'S VISION OF BEING MEMBERS OF ONE ANOTHER.

IN JUST A FEW WEEKS WITH STERLING AND WHITE AND A LITTLE OVER 2 YEARS WITH PIONEER, I HAVE MADE SOME AMAZING REALIZATIONS ABOUT YOU. CHARACTERISTICS I BELIEVE PAUL WOULD BE PROUD OF!

I HAVE WITNESSED: YOU ARE INTENSELY RELATIONAL; YOU EMPHASIZE BELONGING; DECISION MAKING IS LESS FORMAL AND HIGHLY RELATIONAL. EACH CONGREGATION HAS A LONG SOCIAL MEMORY OF THEIR CONGREGATION AND SURROUNDING COMMUNITY. ALMOST EVERY MEMBER IS A VOLUNTEER. YOU ARE LAY-LED IN COUNTLESS WAYS, EVEN WITH PASTORAL LEADERSHIP. YOU CONTRIBUTE EXPONENTIALLY TO YOUR SURROUNDING COMMUNITY IN SUPPORT AND SPACE SHARING.

TODAY WE AFFIRM THAT WE ARE ALL PART OF THE BODY OF CHRIST, AND THAT MEMBERSHIP GIVES US STRENGTH TO DO WHAT IS SET BEFORE US. AS PART OF THE BODY OF CHRIST, LET US CONTINUE TO ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER AND HELP ONE ANOTHER. WE ALL ARE IN THIS ENTERPRISE OF BEING CHURCH TOGETHER, REGARDLESS IF WE WORSHIP IN SEPARATE BUILDINGS AT DIFFERENT TIMES. THEREFORE, WE ARE TO LEARN FROM EACH OTHER AND HELP EACH OTHER. TO LOVE THOSE IN OUR COMMUNITIES.

FRED CRADDOCK TELLS THE FOLLOWING STORY: MY MOTHER TOOK US TO CHURCH AND SUNDAY SCHOOL; MY FATHER DIDN'T GO. HE COMPLAINED ABOUT SUNDAY DINNER BEING LATE WHEN SHE CAME HOME. SOMETIMES THE PREACHER WOULD CALL, AND MY FATHER WOULD SAY, "I KNOW WHAT THE CHURCH WANTS. THE CHURCH DOESN'T CARE ABOUT ME. CHURCH WANTS ANOTHER NAME, MORE MONEY, ANOTHER NAME, MORE MONEY. RIGHT? ISN'T THAT THE NAME OF IT? ANOTHER NAME, MORE MONEY." THAT'S WHAT HE ALWAYS SAID.

SOMETIMES WE'D HAVE A REVIVAL. PASTOR WOULD BRING THE EVANGELIST AND SAY TO THE EVANGELIST, "THERE'S A MAN I WANT YOU TO MEET." AND MY FATHER WOULD MEET HIM AND SAY THE SAME THING...THE CHURCH DOESN'T CARE ABOUT ME. THE CHURCH WANTS ANOTHER NAME AND MORE MONEY." I THINK MY FATHER SAID THAT 1,000 TIMES.

ONE TIME HE DIDN'T SAY IT. HE WAS IN THE VETERAN'S HOSPITAL, AND HE WAS DOWN TO 70 POUNDS. THEY'D TAKEN OUT HIS THROAT, AND SAID, "IT'S TOO LATE." THEY PUT IN A METAL TUBE, AND XRAYS BURNED HIM TO PIECES. CRADDOCK SAYS, I FLEW IN TO SEE HIM. HE COULDN'T SPEAK, COULDN'T EAT. I LOOKED AROUND THE ROOM, POTTED PLANTS AND CUT FLOWERS ON ALL THE WINDOWSILLS, A STACK OF CARDS TWENTY INCHES DEEP BESIDE

THE BED. AND EVEN THAT TRAY WHERE THEY PUT FOOD, IF YOU CAN EAT, ON THAT WAS A FLOWER. AND ALL THE FLOWERS BESIDE THE BED, EVERY CARD, EVERY BLOSSOM, WERE FROM PERSONS OR GROUPS FROM OUR CHURCH AND OTHER CHURCHES IN OUR SMALL TOWN.

HE SAW ME READ A CARD. HE COULD NOT SPEAK, SO HE TOOK A KLEENEX BOX AND WROTE ON THE SIDE OF IT A LINE FROM SHAKESPEARE. IF HE HAD NOT WRITTEN THIS LINE, I WOULD NOT BE TELLING YOU THIS STORY. HE WROTE: "IN THIS HARSH WORLD, DRAW YOUR BREATH IN PAIN TO TELL MY STORY."

I SAID, "WHAT IS YOUR STORY, DADDY?"

AND HE WROTE, "I WAS WRONG."

WATCH WHAT GOD, AND THEN YOU DO IT. MOSTLY WHAT GOD DOES IS LOVE YOU. KEEP COMPANY WITH HIM AND LOEARN A LIFE OF LOVE. OBSERVE HOW CHRIST LOVED US. HIS LOVE WAS NOT CAUTIOUS BUT EXTRAVAGANT. LOVE LIKE THAT. LOVE LIKE THAT.