

Message: "Pulling Back On Human Veils" - 3-15-26

Scripture: Ephesians 5:8-14

⁸For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— ⁹for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. ¹⁰Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹²For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Did I ever tell you about the time my family won a brand-new Lazy-boy recliner?

I was probably around ten years old when we received notice of our prize in the mail; it announced our prize in the form of a promotional sent out to a limited number of households - the promotional offered us a brand-new Lazy boy recliner in return for us visiting a time-share condominium complex up in Dillon, Colorado. The promotional was being held to tell people about the "exciting time-share opportunities in our world-class ski resort paradise." There was a picture of an amazing Lazy-boy recliner near the announcement. My parents decided that it was too good an offer to pass up - a beautiful trip into the mountains, some information about affordable housing for winter skiing or summer hiking, and a brand new lazy-boy recliner to boot. My grandpa had one of those chairs, so big it had its own zip code; it was the lap of luxury, reclining this way and that, full leather (or at least imitation leather), extra pillowed and comfy - I loved that chair. In any event, we headed off to Dillon, took the tour of the time-share properties (which we quickly realized even time-shares were way beyond our budget), and eagerly awaited our prize at the end of the tour. That's when they brought out this (slide). I wonder if you can imagine our sense of disappointment?

OK, technically, it was a recliner; it would rock backwards some.

And yes, it was a Lazy-boy brand name chair (it had "Lazy-boy" on the label) And it was new.

But it certainly was not what we expected - and hardly something we would use. My parents simply looked at the chair and shook their heads (it was not a comfortable chair for adults, amounting to not much more than a back rest when sitting on the ground); us kids tried it out as well, but it seemed to be designed to be uncomfortable; this added insult to injury. We felt we had been cheated, even lied to. But I am certain that, if we had looked at the advertisement a little closer, we probably would have seen a disclaimer in very small type that said something like "picture does not necessarily represent exact prize item.").

Needless to say, we were doubly-cautious of any similar free offers in the future, for we had experienced a phenomenon known as MMO -- Market-Motivated obfuscation.

And, before you think it, let me say I did not make that phrase up. I found this definition on the internet:

Market-Motivated Obfuscation is the deliberate use of vague claims and selective data to inflate a product's perceived environmental merit; it is the practice of making information unclear or confusing to mislead customers; it often involves jargon, complex language, or vague terms to obscure the true nature of a product or service; it is often used in the attempt to hide negative aspects of a product, ideology, or action, or on the contrary, inflate the importance, immanence, or value of said item.

Boy, do we have a lot of MMO in our world today! And et it first be said that Market-Motivated Obfuscation is nothing new. It is no secret that people can be very good at misrepresenting reality. And we've all had this proven to us personally -- We've all been taken for a ride, or sold a bill of goods, or purchased a bridge somewhere - we've all been had at one time or another.

What's often different, though, is the matter of scale involved, something we can truly identify with in today's world. In so very many ways, our world is being had, is being sold a bill of goods, or is being taken for a ride - in other words, our world is experiencing Power-Motivated Obfuscation. Whole countries are misrepresenting reality in order to lay claim to another's territory through wars of choice and genocidal excess; whole administrations are hiding and redacting files to keep the truth of their involvement in sexual scandal from being revealed; whole cultures are being unjustly vilified in order to appease the prejudices of the powerful few. The misrepresentation of reality has been given a tremendous boost by the exponential growth of the internet partnered with the exponential decrease on any checks or balances upon the factual basis of what is communicated - and we are finding out that lies are indeed much easier to spread than truth.

Paul's passage today is squarely centered on this human tendency to misrepresent reality, although I believe he would be stunned at how the misrepresentation has grown in our present day. Yet the truth he bears witness to is just as valid in our context as it was in his, 2000 years ago. He recognized how easily truth gets maligned, and how we are so very prone to find ourselves in a variety of darkneses of human design.

His counsel is simple: from verses 8 and 9, he says that we are to "Live as children of light—⁹for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true." Live as ones centered in what is good, and what is right, and what is true. He's talking about virtue, about integrity, about honesty and uprightness and morality. He's also talking about compassion and justice and generosity; he's talking about love and all its implications. Be good and do good; be true yourself and pursue truth in the world; work towards righteousness in your life, and help others do the same.

That's the positive side of Paul's counsel, which almost everyone can agree with if they actually follow Jesus. But there is a negative side to Paul's counsel that often is bypassed as we practice our faith. Paul continues speaking after telling us that we are to live as children of light, and he tells us something that causes many of us to pause: he says in verse 11 that we are to "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them."

Oh, Paul, how quickly you move from preaching to meddling! How quickly things become uncomfortable for us good Christians! How fast it becomes clear that we cannot simply bask in the radiance of goodness, truth, and virtue - but we are asked to expose their opposites for what they are - unworthy of the lives God has given us; unworthy of the lives around us; and unworthy of the world God has created.

We are to expose the works of darkness - now, what does this mean? So often we get tripped up in the sense of this not being our area of business; we have been taught that faith is about our personal relationship with Jesus, about how our heart is connected with the heart of God or not. Yes, this is a very important part of our faith understanding, but it is a part that is unreal so long as words do not lead to the life they profess to follow; professing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior means nothing if it doesn't lead to following Jesus - and that's precisely where many Christians lose momentum. You see, the idea of a savior cannot save; only the life connected to that savior, as it lives according to that savior, can save. And Jesus has made it clear in so many ways, to follow Jesus is to both embrace the life he offered us AND resist the many forms of death offered by the world. In other words, you cannot only work for the good; you must work against the bad. You cannot only stand for what is right; you must confront what is wrong. You cannot only speak the truth, you must also call out falsehood for what it is.

It has come to my attention that I worry some people in our church, that I sometimes preach what some consider "politics from the pulpit." They worry that I'm over-stepping proper boundaries, that anytime I talk about what's going on in our country or our world I am moving into territory best left alone. Separation of church and state, after all. I have even been told more than once "Pastor John, be careful; we don't want you to get hurt!" Let me first say how grateful I am for the concern; I know I am loved here and cared for here, and it is so encouraging that people are concerned for my welfare. But I must let you know that my welfare would be so much more in danger if I misrepresented Jesus to you, if I shared only a part of the revelation of God with you, picking and choosing pleasantries and comfort and joy at the expense of ignoring the rest of what Jesus emphasized - for we are also to be Jesus in the world as he resists what is wrong and speaks truth to power. It is never my place to preach politics; but if we follow Jesus it is all of our place to preach, teach, and live principles connected to Jesus - and those principles are often the very things that politics attack. We must stand for the principles of Jesus if our faith is to mean anything substantial; when those principles are threatened, we must resist, we must shine a light on what is going wrong, we must make an effort to make things right. And we must remember it is God's truth that is our greatest protection, the only protection that stands the tests of time - and the only protection that can effectively address humanity gone wrong.

This is what it means when Jesus calls us his body on earth, a body which is called to joy and abundance and love, but never at the expense of the harder side of faith, the call to resist violence, to stand with the oppressed, to shine a light where darkness reigns, to speak truth to falsehood, to include the excluded, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and visit those in prison. If these efforts are avoided, Christ is avoided as well. If these efforts become our own, however, we find Jesus doing the same, in spirit and in truth, in the lives of everyone involved. Jesus is made known in both what he embraces and what he resists - and to know Jesus is to be involved in both sides of faith's coin.

So, let us be about what is good and right and true; may such things fill our hearts and encourage our living.

But also let us also work to expose what is bad and wrong and false, that there may be more room in the world for the good and right and true to grow.

And let us understand that it takes both to follow Jesus.