

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Ephesians 5:1-21

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1Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children 2and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

3But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. 4Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. 5For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. 6Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. 7Therefore do not be partners with them.

8For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light 9(for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) 10and find out what pleases the Lord. 11Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. 12For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. 13But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 14for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said:

"Wake up, O sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."

15Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, 16making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. 18Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. 19Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, 20always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

21Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

I was ready to retire last week. After hearing a comment that most ministers and church leaders only dream of hearing, I just wanted to retire because it seemed to me that ministry couldn't get any better. Sure, I have thirty-two years before I'm even eligible for retirement but had I heard that comment in the year 2040, I may have just gotten up from the meeting and walked away because it didn't seem like things could get much better—because in that moment, things were pretty darn great.

And what was so darn great? In a committee meeting, someone said this about coming to church. "It's no longer all about me and what I'm going to receive. It's more about understanding how other people might be receiving this . . . I recognize needs in other people and see how a sermon or words or a song is going to touch them."

Not only did her comment delight me but I believe her remarks would have also brought a smile to the face of the Apostle Paul who wrote, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." In other words, not just out of your love and respect for the other person but also and more importantly out of your love and respect for Christ, honor each other, submit to each other, recognize and meet each other's needs because that is what Christ has done for us. Don't let personal preferences and expectations stand in the way of being brothers and sisters in Christ. And she said, "I recognize needs in other people and see how a sermon or words or a song is going to touch them." Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, indeed.

Somewhere along the line, the mainline church moved away from submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ and instead fell prey to the consumerist attitudes of the wider society. Now church leaders are taught how to "make the sell" to those who are "church shopping." Churches invest considerable energy and money into demographic studies and interest surveys to determine exactly what people are looking for in a church. While some of these endeavors have been fruitful, there is also danger in applying a consumerist attitude to our worship communities. In some cases, we have created congregations of folks who walk through the doors of the sanctuary with the same attitude they would have walking through the doors of Burger King where, as the BK slogan claims, you "have it your way." We have this expectation that every hymn and every reading and every sermon and every decoration has to meet our expectations and fulfill our wants and needs. We want it our way—and of course we want it our way because the line we're fed every place else—except maybe in our homes and this house of

worship—is that we can have it our way. We can have extra cheese or high-speed or leather interior or advanced placement or satin finish or whatever other minutiae we’re duped into thinking is a vitally important choice in life—we can make these choices and get exactly what we think we want because we’re the customer and the customer is always right.

But the thing about this consumerist attitude is that it holds the individual as the supreme unit in society. Why else do cars have separate heating and cooling systems for the driver and passenger sides but to assure that each individual can enjoy exactly the temperature setting he or she chooses. Gone are the days of compromise when one person is a little cold and the other person is a little warm but you put up with your discomfort because you’re just glad to be out and about with the one you love. Now everybody’s got exactly what they want when they want it and the art of compromise is dying a slow death.

But here’s the thing when it comes to consumerism and church—we are not Burger King. We don’t have separate heating and cooling zones for the east and west sides of the sanctuary. We don’t have seats with arm rests into which you can plug your headsets and then choose the channel with In The Garden, Old Rugged Cross, and Blessed Assurance and then self-select your sermon topic. Church doesn’t work like that. Here we are each one among many and our many come from diverse church, economic, political, and cultural backgrounds.

And so what to do? How do I, as your minister, choose hymns and scriptures and readings and a sermon topic that will appeal to everyone? Well, I don’t. And, I can’t. And even if I could, I wouldn’t because I am not a movie producer and you are not a focus group choosing the most satisfying ending for an upcoming blockbuster. We don’t decide the outcome of this story. God does. And God is still speaking and God is speaking to each one of us and we all hear God’s voice a little differently. And that’s fine and often we find what we’re looking for precisely because we’re looking for it. In a single sermon, one of you may hear a message of forgiveness and another a message of grace and still another a message about discipleship and truth be told, sometimes the minister would be surprised to hear that any of you heard any of those things because she thought she was preaching about justice. But, thanks be to God, that’s the way the Spirit works in community.

And that is what a church is—a community. That is why we strive to make decisions by consensus, not the rule of the majority. Because the truth of the matter is, every soul here is precious and important to God and to us and just because he or she isn’t in the majority doesn’t mean that he or she isn’t to be honored. There are no Super Delegates among us. The one who’s attended the longest, the one who pledges the most, the one who serves on the most committees, the one who can’t afford to give but a dollar, the one who doesn’t have time to be on a committee, the one who’s here for the first time—we are all children of God, beloved and worthy of honor. And that is what can be so precious and unique and wonderful and blessed about a church family—it takes us beyond ourselves, our perspectives, and our preferences. Churches work best when they affirm us while also moving us outside of ourselves to recognize the needs and value and goodness of others. And that lady’s comment at the meeting last week illustrated that point so beautifully—“It’s more about understanding how other people might be receiving this . . .” The joy comes not in having your steak cooked exactly to your specifications for every meal but rather in watching the person across the table from you savor her vegetarian lasagna because she was obviously hungry for it. And because you love the person eating the lasagna more than you love medium rare steak, you treasure the meal. And of course, as a family member at the table, you watch her and trust that at some point, your turn will come and there will be steak on the menu and without you even having to tell anyone, it will be medium rare.

Paul asks us to live as children of the light. “Children of the Light offer thanksgiving and do what is good and right and true. [They] try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord . . . everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light.” When the committee member made her comment, or more accurately

when she first had that revelation about the nature of being a part of a church community, God's light shone more brightly around her. It shone on the faces and lives of her brothers and sisters in Christ. When this happens to her or to us, we no longer need to be in the limelight created by a consumerist culture in which I am led to believe that I am the individual among individuals, with the spot lights shining so brightly on me and my needs that other folks are left in the shadows where I do not really see them. This woman has stepped out of the blinding lights of individualism and now sees her brothers and sisters in Christ through the love light of God's grace and mercy. Paul writes, "8For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light 9(for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) 10and find out what pleases the Lord." Ironically, the darkness of the consumerist culture is not that it leaves us in darkness but rather it blinds us with the brightness of me, mine, and I to the point that we grow blind to the needs, preferences, desires, and dreams of others.

But not here—not in church—we hope not in this church anyway. Each Sunday when we come through those doors, we commit ourselves to coming out of the darkness of a consumerist, Me, Mine, and I society. We commit to letting the light shine on everybody here—not just on ourselves, not just on a select few and not just on the majority. In our Mission Statement we state it outright "Our Mission is to welcome those seeking a diverse and supportive family in Christ." Our mission was lived out beautifully by a church member a few months ago who said, "It was the end of a Bluegrass Service and a friend came up to me and said, 'Gosh, wasn't that just great! It makes me feel so good.'" Well, the man telling me this story would be fine with our beautiful choir, piano, and organ music each Sunday and up to that point, admitted that Bluegrass Sundays weren't his favorite. And they're still not. But he saw the light of the Spirit glowing in that man's face, a face flushed with joy and enthusiasm. And so now he looks forward to our occasional Bluegrass Sundays—not because he loves the music, but rather because he loves his brother in Christ and knows that on those four Sundays a year, his friend's spirit will soar on the wings of that music. And that's more important to him than the music. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

And though we are to submit to each other, I, alas, will not be submitting my notice of retirement to you anytime soon. Because though it was good, really good to hear that woman's comments at that meeting last week, you've got me intrigued. I'm hooked. And I hope you are too. I'm hooked on waiting and watching and listening and hoping for the next time that you or I will submit to one another out of reverence for Christ and in so doing we will move ever further from the darkness into the bright and brilliant light of God's love.