

**The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost ≅ Year B**  
**Saint Paul's Episcopal Church**  
**August 13, 2006**

*Walk in Love as Christ Loved Us*

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**Lessons for the Day**

- Psalm 34:1-8
- Deuteronomy 8:1-10
- Ephesians 4:30-5:2
- John 6:37-51

**Homily**

I greet you in the name of **God our Creator, Christ our Brother**, and the **Holy Spirit** who sustains and sanctifies us, empowering us to love and to serve both God and Christ. (Pause)

**Amen.**

Our epistle lesson for today is a very brief passage from the letter to the Ephesians. In it we hear one of my favorite sentences from the Bible:

**" . . . live in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."**

Ephesians 5:2b (NRSV)

As many of you know, I am an adult convert to the Episcopal Church. My first conscious memory of hearing this scripture passage is when former Associate Pastor Jeff Murph would speak it as the offertory sentence during the 5:30 weekday Eucharist here at Saint Paul's. I loved then -- as I love *now* -- the notion of Christ giving himself up for us (for me, indeed!) as an offering and a sacrifice to God! What amazing grace!

Beyond that memory, though, the phrase also evokes one of those "marriage moments" which -- as the confession says -- "we from time to time most grievously have committed, in thought word and deed".

Like many latecomers to the world of liturgy, ***I went through a phase when I was all about liturgy***. Early one spring morning -- when Laura and I were in the middle of listing and selling our home -- I lit a small briquette of charcoal. I placed the charcoal in a small Pyrex container, covered it with incense from Holy Cross Monastery, and set it in the middle of our living room coffee table. Then I sat down to read the Daily Office.

Just as I finished the prayers, Laura walked in. She sniffed suspiciously, then looked around curiously and asked, "Whatever is that I smell?"

I told her that it was incense -- that I had been making "a fragrant offering to the Lord."

To which she replied, "Well knock it off with the incense until we sell this house!"

Worse yet, the charcoal got so hot it scorched the coffee table. We'll talk more about that later -- suffice it to say that the table -- to this very day -- bears the marks of my "fragrant offering to the Lord."

But what of the rest of these few verses from Ephesians? In them we are introduced to some ideas about how we might offer (or even become) "a fragrant offering to the Lord" . . .

**" . . . do not grieve the Holy Spirit . . ."**

the writer of Ephesians enjoins us, and -- at least for me -- that breaks open my whole understanding of what happens when I sin. I am, sadly, accustomed to making people mad. We have all done it, and we all have our stock responses that comfort us -- and protect us from the other's anger.

Many of us even have defenses we have crafted for dealing with God's imagined anger:

- God will understand; God will give me a break.
- God knows how irritating that other person is.
- God -- after all -- is a God of mercy and forgiveness.

But the notion of **grieving** God is an altogether different thing! How much it pains me to think about grieving God! Surely we can irritate, aggravate, or even enrage God. We did it to our parents, and many of us see God as -- among other things -- a super-parent-on-steroids.

But grieving God in the person of the Holy Spirit? That's another thing altogether . . .

When I think about grieving someone -- when I consider the times when I have been profoundly wounded in my own life -- I realize some important things:

1. **It is impossible to be grieved by someone you do not love.** *People you do not care about can make you angry, but they can rarely make you sad.*
2. **When someone grieves you, your grief is generally for them as much as it is for yourself.** That is, your heart breaks for the pain you know they are going to cause themselves through their poor choices, or addictive behaviors, or long wandering into the wildernesses of life.
3. **All it takes for your grief to be assuaged is for the person to turn away from the harmful behavior and embrace behaviors that produce wholeness and healing in their life.** *You don't want an apology so much as you want true repentance* -- a turning away from the harmful behavior.

**Perhaps our human understanding of grief can illumine our understanding of this passage from Ephesians** -- the passage that speaks of "grieving the Holy Spirit". Perhaps -- at least in this case -- we and the Holy Spirit grieve similarly. We are, after all, created in God's own image!

So -- what do we do?

**The first thing** we can do is to **reframe our understanding of sin**. Sin is not so much "*breaking God's rules*" or "*making God mad*" as it is a turning away from the life God wishes for us -- the life God intended for us when we were knit together in our mother's wombs.

**We grieve God when we make choices that move us further away from wholeness**, when we make choices that **wound others or ourselves**, when we make choices that **telegraph our own dogged determination to forswear the counsel of our Creator God, and instead choose to be god in our own universe**.

**The second thing** we can do is to **examine our behavior in the light of what we know about God's desires for us**. The behaviors that grieve the Holy Spirit in our passage from Ephesians (bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander and malice) all accrue from choosing to honor our own will rather than choosing to follow the example of Christ.

So we examine our own behavior. Or -- as the Book of Common Prayer counsels:

**"Examine (y/our lives and conduct by the rule of God's commandments, that you may perceive where in you have offended in what you have done or left undone, whether in thought, word, or deed."**

BCP, "An Exhortation," page 317, paragraph one

So -- if **we** are doing something wrong (if **I** am doing something wrong!) -- a big step is to notice it, to acknowledge it, to name it as a deviation from God's perfect will for our -- and my -- lives.

**The third and final step is difficult but it is not complicated.** The final step is just this: **stop it**. Whatever it is you are doing that is grieving God, whatever it is that is taking you away from the One who made you, knows you, loves you, and wills only good for your life, **stop it**.

And by this I don't mean to will yourself to holiness. That is an altogether fruitless task in the first place and, in the second place, do-it-yourself holiness is one more way of celebrating and worshiping your will, not God's will for you.

No -- I am not talking about do-it-yourself holiness. I am talking about naked surrender, a surrender that is perhaps most familiar to those who have walked the path of recovery from addiction of one sort or another.

Sure this surrender is hard. What that is worthwhile in life is not?

Margaret Guenther -- in one of her books about spiritual direction -- tells the story of sitting with a young woman who felt called to the priesthood. Margaret says to the young woman, "You know, if you do this, it could cost you dearly."

To which the woman replies, "Margaret, **We are talking about a call from God!**"

Indeed we are. We **are** talking about a call from God.

We **are** talking about a call from God for each one of us -- **a call to trans-formation**. A call to forswear our old ways that grieve the Holy Spirit. A call to die to self. A call to become a new creation in Christ Jesus.

This call will mean different things to each one of us.

For me, I will have to crucify the attitude of judgmentalness and moral superiority that undergirds my political opinions. I'll have to acknowledge that even those with whom I disagree may also be honestly seeking the will of God.

Others of us will have to deal with other ways that we grieve the spirit. Perhaps it is a grasping holding-on to resources, afraid that we cannot trust God with own needs. Perhaps we grieve the spirit through gossip, or through naming God's good gifts to us as things we have done for ourselves.

**Take a moment to name your own demons** -- I'm too busy with my own to catalog yours. **(Pause)**

So we name our sins and we -- by effort and the grace of God -- are able to stop them. **Then what?**

The most amazing thing will happen, that's what! When we purposefully root out the ways we grieve God, there is room in our lives for new ways of living. There is room in our lives for kindness, for tenderheartedness, for forgiveness -- for all the behaviors we find listed in our reading from the Letter to the Ephesians. We "live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Ephesians 5:2a (NRSV)

The table I spoke of earlier still bears the scorch marks of my fragrant offering to the Lord through incense. How much better and more redemptive for each of us bear on our very selves testimony to God's power to transform lives. To God's power to root out judgment and replace it with compassion. To God's power to ferret out pride and replace it with humility.

Let us "Live in love, as Christ loved you and gave himself up for you, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." And let us go forth from here -- empowered by the love of God in Christ -- to live a life that pleases, not grieves, the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God.

**Amen.**