

Living the Easter Life

1 Corinthians 4:11-13, 16

Overview

Theme

Absorbing and redeeming the evils of the world is the hard work, with joy, to which Christians are called.

Call(s) to Action

1. We are to be spiritual cleaning “routinists” – devoting our lives to confronting, absorbing, and redeeming the evils of this world – and find joy the process, in spite of sufferings
2. We face suffering with joy because all things, including life and death, belong to us in Christ
3. We seek out the dark places of the world with courage, because we are already victorious in Christ

Primary Text

11 To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, **12** and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; **13** when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things... **16** I urge you, then, be imitators of me. (1 Corinthians 4:11-13, 16 ESV)

Secondary Texts

Exodus 19:10; Acts 1:4-5, 13-14; 1 Corinthians 3:21b-23; Romans 8:31b-32, 34b-39; 1 Corinthians 11:1

Sermon

Introduction

In most Christian communities the lead-up to Easter, the season of Lent and Holy Week, are typically big deals. Easter Sunday is a major day of celebration. What may be lost is that the Easter season then goes on for the next seven weeks, longer than the seasons of Lent and Advent.

That makes today the second Sunday of Easter. It’s one thing to celebrate Easter. We do that well. But what is living Easter? What might that look like?

I read an article in the Wall Street Journal on March 19 about cleaning products¹, about how they are getting stronger, not just in cleaning power, but physically. Apparently, there are some people so into

¹ “The Cleanest Homes of All” on WSJ.com, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323415304578370353899087268.html>, retrieved April 2, 2013.

cleaning that they need physically stronger products – mops, scrubbers, etc. – to stand up to their kind of use.

The article talks about how the company Johnson & Johnson classifies people into different types of “cleaners.”

About 21% are called “cleaning routinists.” They perform 18 cleanings tasks per week for a total of about five hours. A spokesperson is quoted, “They really enjoy the process.”

About 24% are “quick and convenient cleaners” who spend about 4-1/2 hours cleaning. About 19% fall into the “Cleaning is Nirvana” group who finds joy in cleaning but less meticulous than the routinists, and these spend *only* 4 hours and 18 minutes a week in cleaning. Another 15% are “time-pressured appearance cleaners” who spend about three hours a week doing “drive-by” cleaning, just enough to keep things looking good. The remaining 21% are “cleaner avoiders” who don’t like cleaning and spend just 2-1/2 hours on cleaning tasks.

I don’t know about the rest of you, but I fall squarely into the “cleaning avoider” category. I’m pretty certain I usually don’t even spend 2-1/2 hours a week on cleaning. I appreciate the end results, but I don’t enjoy the process.

Part of the Easter season is a countdown to the Day of Pentecost. In Hebrew this day is known as Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks. It commemorates the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai. The day also marks the end of the grain harvest season.

Exodus 19 records that immediately prior to the giving of the Law, the Israelites were commanded to consecrate themselves by cleansing and purifying themselves². Following Jesus’ ascension, the disciples remained in Jerusalem, devoting themselves to prayer in preparation for receiving the promised Holy Spirit³. I think it is appropriate to see this as analogous to purifying and consecrating one’s self.

When the Day of Pentecost arrived and the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, their witness resulted in three-thousand people accepting Jesus as their Messiah. I see this as analogous to the harvest that Shavuot celebrates. It also looks forward to the Great Day of Harvest when Jesus returns to restore all things.

How are we to live in this great in-between time between the First Easter Sunday and the Final Day of Pentecost⁴?

² Exodus 19:10

³ Acts 1:4-5, 13-14

⁴ Although I don’t necessarily think the Second Coming and the Judgment Day of the Lord are fulfillment of any kind of prophetic “type” represented by Pentecost, I think there are enough parallels (e.g., prominence of Law/Judgment, the end of the harvest season, the coming of God to his people) that the Second Coming can be likened to a Day of Pentecost.

Paul, the Domestic Servant

The world doesn't think very highly of janitors, custodians and other cleaning staff – the ones who clean up after the more “privileged” people. I suspect we are all guilty of thinking that at one time or another. If the garbage isn't picked up, we complain. If the hotel room isn't spotless when we check-in, we complain. If the bathroom is filthy, we complain. But if the garbage is picked up, if the hotel room and bathroom are clean, do we actively seek out the cleaning staff to thank them? Probably not. We think, “*They're just doing their job.*”

In our text from 1 Corinthians 4, Paul sees himself and his colleagues in a similar light to how we would view cleaning staff. They are working hard for the sake of the gospel, but it is not glamorous work. Not only are they unappreciated, Rome is against them and many Jews are too. They suffer privations and abuse. In the first part of this epistle we read that the people who have benefited from the work of Paul, the Corinthians Christians, are divided. They have failed to appreciate the gifts of the gospel given to them through Paul in Christ. Some are even accusing Paul of being unfaithful in his work for them.

What is Paul's response? This letter is certainly a response. It is an admonishment. Yet at the same time Paul imitates Christ. He writes “when reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat.”⁵ Paul identifies with the cross of Christ. If Christ suffered, he will accept suffering, too.

Paul then writes something that loses much in its translation to English. The translation reads, “We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.”⁶ On the surface it sounds as if Paul is saying that he and his colleagues have become the lowest of the low, nothing to the world, beings of no value except to be thrown out. While some of that may be true, there is something else more vital that Paul's original audience would have caught.

The first word, “scum,” refers to the dust and dirt that is thrown out after doing house cleaning. The second word, “refuse,” refers to debris that results from scraping down something, from cleaning, and from purifying.⁷ Paul appears to be painting a picture of their ministry as one that cleanses and purifies something in the world. In the process the ministers take upon themselves the residue, the dirt, and trash that results.

William Orr and James Walther, in their commentary on this text writes,

The end results of all this [Paul's work of ministry] was that *the dirt scoured from the world* was poured upon him and his apostolic co-laborers. They then acted as cleansing agents, taking to themselves hate, malice, and bitterness; and by absorbing this without violent or vengeful response, they took away those evils. Thus in a particular way they were carrying on the work of Christ.⁸

⁵ 1 Corinthians 4:12b-13a

⁶ 1 Corinthians 4:13b

⁷ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes*, Kindle edition, location 1746

⁸ Orr and Walther, *1 Corinthians*, p. 192; quoted in Bailey, location 1748

Christ himself began the work of cleansing and purification on the cross, by taking upon himself all the sins, and evils, and death itself, and taking them to the grave. He then emerged victorious, having conquered death. To his disciples Christ delegated the further work of spreading the cleansing and purifying power to the world. Paul and the apostles accepted this work. Back at Sinai the Israelites worked to cleanse and purify themselves before meeting God. The apostles, through their work, prepare a community of the faithful to meet Christ again, and to present him with a harvest.

Paul is Okay with His Condition

Did Paul actively seek to suffer? No. But he did not run away from it. He saw where people suffered, saw opportunities to cleanse and to purify, to redeem the suffering and free the oppressed. The most important work of Christ happens in the darkest places of the world. The natural human tendency is to try to avoid those places, but Paul did not. He did not seek *to suffer*, but he did go looking *for suffering*. There is a significant difference between the two.

How did Paul overcome the human fear of suffering and death? He looked to the cross and resurrection. He saw the destruction of death and he saw the victory of life over death.

Just a little before our text for today, in 3:21-23 Paul wrote, “For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.”⁹ What Paul means is that for those who belong to Christ there is nothing to fear. The entire world belongs to Christ. The power of life and death, too. And all of time—present and future. For all who belong to Christ, all that belongs to Christ belong to them.

What Paul wrote to the Corinthians bears striking resemblance to what he would eventually write to the Romans:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ... Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹⁰

Paul does not fear sufferings, hardships, pain, abuse, torture, even death, because they cannot touch who he is. Christ has conquered the sources of fear, and by being in Christ, Paul too, has conquered all sources of fear.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:21b-23

¹⁰ Romans 8:31b-32, 34b-39

Conclusion: Christians Imitate Paul (and Christ)

Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians is, "Imitate me." In chapter 11 Paul writes again, "Imitate me" but adds "as I imitate Christ."¹¹ To imitate Paul then, is to ultimately imitate Christ.

We, too, should strive to imitate Paul's example of responding to the evils of the world.

When evil is directed toward us, we should respond, not with violence or vengeance, but in grace and compassion. We should absorb the evil and redeem it with grace. By doing so we do our part to cleanse and to purify the ravages of sin in this world.

Like Paul we should seek out the dark places of the world to cleanse and to purify them. We ought to search out those who are suffering from the effects of sin and those who are under oppression to the power of sin, to bring to them the cleansing and purifying power of Christ—the power to redeem, to free, and to restore. Like Paul, we have nothing to fear, because all things belong to Christ and we are in Christ.

Where are you being called to go today? What is it that God is calling you to? What cleansing and purifying tasks are you being assigned? You don't have to go far to encounter the dark places. The abused, the addicted, the discouraged, the depressed, the diseased, the discarded... They are with us. Are you being called to do something about those?

On the other side are those who inflict, enable, and through words and deeds subtly condone evil and oppression. Perhaps God is offering you the grace of courage and strength to confront the oppressors.

Maybe you feel a tugging to speak out, confront, and work to battle the power systems that marginalize and oppress individuals and classes of people.

Each of us is being called to participate in God's cleansing work. We are God's cleaning staff. We are being sent out to scrape, scrub, sweep, clean, and polish. We are being called to spread the power of God's redemption, restoration, and reconciliation. Paul became a "cleaning routinist" for Christ. He became covered with dirt, refuse, and scum. He did not fear nor did he become agitated. Instead, he found joy. What about you and me?

As we join Christ to redeem and restore the dark places, we contribute to the harvest that will be presented to him when he returns. That's how I see us living the life given to us by Easter.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 11:1