

Messy But Necessary

Being church is a messy business. It's a bit like making sausage, only less appetizing. By the time Sunday morning arrives, we're usually able to put on a good show – but behind the scenes lurks a less-than-pretty picture.

When I was in college I held the high office of Tour Manager of the College Choir. It was my responsibility to schedule venues for the Spring Tour, arrange for housing, and keep the rosters of roommates. I was also the enforcer of rules and regulations. I was the one who made sure the men wore dark trousers, black socks, and well-polished black shoes with their choir robes. That was in the early 70's when many students were still into hippie non-conformity.

I had that job for three years. I thought I knew everything there was to know about managing a choir.

Near graduation in my senior year, I learned that several of the women in the choir had not worn regulation shoes for concerts. They had gone barefoot, but even more astonishing, I was told that under their choir robes several altos and at least one soprano had worn no clothes at all.

I was grateful to learn this after my responsibilities had ended. This knowledge would have constituted a tremendous distraction at the time.

At it turned out, this blatant lack of uniformity didn't affect the music we made together. I remember we sang one Sunday morning in a grand cathedral, our voices amplified by all that stone and marble. We made glorious music that day. I trust that Almighty God, who hears and sees all, paid more attention to the music than the altos' resemblance to Eve in the Garden.

(In his college days, my son Adam was the Manager of the St. Olaf Choir. St. Olaf is in Minnesota where the temperature can drop below zero. I'm sure his altos did not express their non-conformity in quite the same way.)

Apparently, some folks in the church in Rome back in Paul's day were not happy with the messiness of church life. The tension seems to have arisen from the fact that the first generation of Christians were such a mixed bag. There were Jews who insisted on keeping kosher, some to the point of eating only vegetables. There were Gentiles who saw nothing wrong with sitting down at the local barbecue joint to eat pulled-pork sandwiches. And, no doubt, there were people somewhere in between.

Holy days were another issue. Some wanted to keep the old Jewish calendar and some didn't. Some reckoned all days to be the same. Who was right and who was wrong? Apparently, someone wrote to Paul and asked him to settle the matter.

Paul's response was not to set up a bunch of rules and regulations, but rather to remind the Romans how they got to be church in the first place. It wasn't because they ate the right foods or declined to eat the wrong ones. It wasn't because they observed the high holy days. It was because God had welcomed them into the household. **“Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat, for God has welcomed (all of) them.”**

In other words, *“Get over yourselves. None of you is so impressive that God just had to have you in the church. You're here because God has welcomed you. And the same goes for the folks you're quarreling with.”*

This ecclesiastical principle puts a different light on pious practice. The folks who observe dietary restrictions do so to honor God. And those who feel that God has set them free of those same restrictions vary their diet also to honor God. **“Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.”**

The point is not what you do or don't eat, it's whether you're living your life eucharistically – in thanksgiving to the God of grace. **“We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.”**

Notice, Paul does say “live and let live.” That would keep God out of the picture, and ignore the fact that Christians are called to live responsibly in community. What he does say is that whatever we do should point to the God who claims us by grace.

Paul didn't know the word "lifestyle," but I think it's fair to apply his words to the challenge that you and I face today when it comes to making decisions about how to **"live to the Lord."**

I have in mind practical decisions that never used to have theological import. What kind of car should I drive? What kind of washing machine should I buy? What should be the setting of my thermostat? Obviously, Paul did not ask these questions, but Paul did tell the Romans to live to the Lord.

After worship today, the session of this church will meet. High on the agenda will be a proposal to ask Florida Presbytery to send an overture to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). In that overture, we will ask the highest council of the denomination to withdraw its investments in fossil-fuel companies and make special efforts to invest in companies that focus on renewable energy and energy efficiency.

This is not the first time our session has taken up such an overture. We've tried twice before, and so far, the General Assembly has not voted to "green up" its act.

So why are we trying again? Because, as a congregation, we are trying to live eucharistically. We are trying to show our gratitude to God by being better stewards of God's creation, and we're asking our fellow Presbyterians to do the same.

Years ago, this congregation made a commitment to change our corporate lifestyle. We spent hundreds of thousands of dollars making our buildings more energy efficient. We installed one of the city's largest solar voltaic generating plants on the roof of our Education Building. Only after getting our own house in order did we join the effort to get our denomination to divest from fossil-fuel companies.

After the second failed attempt to convince the General Assembly's commissioners to reform its investments, the Presbyterian Foundation created a way for individual congregations to go fossil-free. Our session jumped at the chance. We figured, there's more than one way to green the church. You can do it from the top down, or you can do it from the bottom up -- one congregation at a time.

Or, even better, you can work from both ends at the same time. And so, we're going to try again. It takes a long time to change the minds of Presbyterians, but, contrary to what you might have heard, *Presbyterians can change.*

The one thing we can't do is carry on as though climate change were not a reality and the burning of fossil fuels were not a large contributor to the crisis. As [the overture](#) states, “. . . continuing to hold investments in the fossil-fuel companies that most egregiously contribute to the climate crisis, the PC(USA) is complicit in harming God's creation and the 'least of these' who are disproportionately affected by climate change.”

The first Christians lived in expectation of Christ's imminent return. They believed that the time was at hand. In some ways, it's the same for us. We are living on borrowed time. Climate change is a reality that won't go away and is getting worse.

We're not saying that people who work in the fossil fuel industry are bad people. (I worked summer jobs as a roustabout on an oil rig, an industrial painter in a refinery, and a clerk in a construction company that built cracking towers). This is not about being holier-than-thou or judging our fellow Christians. It's about directing our thanks to God in a way that helps restore creation, not destroy it.

Back in the first century, Christians worried that eating meat might imply that they honored the pagan gods to whom the meat had first been sacrificed. How to order their diet was for them a matter of faith – and a messy one at that.

Today the issues are different, but the principle is the same. We must ask ourselves, are we living to the Lord? Do our lives reflect our gratitude? What god do we worship with our lifestyle, our investments, our time and our talents?

Paul's words to those first Christians in Rome remain surprisingly relevant. Don't condemn one another. Don't second guess the decisions your brothers and sisters make. Instead, see that you are living your life to the Lord, in fellowship with your brothers and sisters in this glorious but messy household called “church.”

Not “live and let live,” but “live in responsible thanksgiving.” Granted, that's a messy way to be the church, but it seems to have been Paul's way. Two thousand years later, it still seems to be the only way for us sinners to live as saints.