

A KARAOKE LIFE

28th in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"
Ephesians 5:19-20

In 1994 the American Association for Forensic Science had a conference here in San Diego. The association president, Don Harper Mills, gave a speech at the awards dinner in which he related a most unusual case. In March of that year the body of a man named Ronald Opus was viewed by the medical examiner who determined that the victim had died from a shotgun wound to the head. The circumstances of his shooting were highly unusual. Opus had jumped from the top of a 10 story building intending to commit suicide after leaving a suicide note. As he fell past the 9th floor he was hit by a shotgun blast through the window, which killed him instantly. Neither Opus nor the shooter was aware that a safety net had been erected at the 8th floor to protect some window washers, so Opus would not have been able to complete his suicide had he not been shot. The fact that his suicidal intent would not have been successful led the M.E. to decide this was a homicide case. The room on the 9th floor from which the shotgun blast came was occupied by an elderly man and his wife. They had been arguing and the man was threatening his wife with the shotgun. He got so angry that he pulled the trigger, but he completely missed his wife and the pellets went through the window and struck Opus, just as he was falling.

When a person intends to kill person A, but actually kills person B in the attempt, that person is guilty of homicide. However, when confronted, both the elderly resident of the apartment and his wife were adamant that neither of them knew the shotgun was loaded. The husband's longstanding habit was to threaten his wife with the unloaded gun. This would seem to make the case one of accidental homicide. However, a witness was found who saw the old couple's son loading the shotgun several weeks prior to the incident. It turned out the elderly lady had cut off her son's financial support, and knowing the tendency of his father to threaten with the shotgun, the son had loaded it in expectation that the father would shoot his mother. This made the case one of murder, for the son intended to have the mother killed, and in the effort took the life of Opus.

This is where it got really weird. The son, in the intervening weeks after loading the shotgun, had become increasingly despondent over his failure to engineer the death of his mother and to gain control of the money he wanted. He became so frustrated and depressed by the situation that he chose to seek to end his life by jumping off the top of a ten story building. His name was Ronald Opus. So Ronald Opus was accidentally responsible for his own death. The examiner closed the case as a suicide.

Well that was a convoluted story. I tell that because sometimes the things we hear about being filled with the Spirit are almost as complicated. And it can feel like it is just as hard to ferret

out the truth about it. Last week we saw what it means to be filled with the Spirit, and it's not what you often hear from people. This week as we look at Ephesians 5:19-20 we will learn about some of the things that are part of being filled with the Spirit, and they are not complicated.

BEING FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT INVOLVES:

PRAISING GOD IN SONG

Paul tells us that being filled with the Spirit of Christ involves speaking to each other in Psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit (better translated “spiritual songs”), and singing and making music from our hearts to the Lord. Some people try to figure out the differences of the three kinds of songs Paul mentioned here. Unfortunately those who do that are all over the map on their explanations and they don't agree with each other. Most scholars now believe Paul wasn't trying make a point of the kinds of music we're supposed to have, he was just using synonyms to say, “all kinds of music.” Today he probably would have said, “Hymns, praise songs, classical songs, country songs, blues songs, rap songs.” Hmm, I don't know about the rap thing... Although he did say we should *speak* to one another in songs and rap is just speaking instead of singing, so maybe it's just what Paul was talking about, yo.

But the logic in Paul's statement is simple. If being filled with the Spirit means looking to Christ to provide the comfort, the joy, the peace, and the strength you need to get through life, one way you will do that is by singing to God. This is about Psalms, which were written as songs of praise to God, hymns and spiritual songs. The point is to honor God and to encourage us to serve him and praise him.

Notice that this praise goes in two directions. There is a horizontal aspect. Paul says we are to speak to one another in these songs. There is also a vertical element of praise. We are to make music in our hearts to the Lord. We are to lift up our praise to him.

For me this passage raises two questions. First, why is praising God so important, and second, why is singing such a big deal? Let's start with that first one. Why is praising God such an important thing that it is an element of what it means to be filled with the Spirit?

It corrects our faulty default.

For quite a few years now whenever Laurie and I travel by air we have gotten the TSA precheck without ever having done anything to obtain it. They just give it to us automatically. I assumed it was because they figured we'd gotten too old to be a threat to anybody. That convenience saves us a lot of time and aggravation at airports. Then last year we flew to Sacramento to attend a wedding. As usual, on the way up we got precheck. But when we checked in for our flight home I was stunned and dismayed when Laurie got precheck, but I

didn't. I got the "stand in a long line and do all the stuff that strips you of human dignity" assignment. I was very disappointed, but it was okay because I knew that Laurie would choose to suffer with me rather than enjoy her privileged position without me. Wrong again, bucko. She said, "Have fun. I'll see you on the other side." I was miffed at TSA's unfair treatment of me, but figured it was one of those supposedly "random" deals TSA does. I know that if anyone is going to be chosen for a random thing, it will be me. It doesn't feel random. It feels like persecution. But I got through it. Then last fall we went on a vacation. It was back to business as usual on the flight out as we got the precheck. But on our return flight once again Laurie got it, but I didn't. All right, now I know they're out to get me. TSA has it in for me. They clearly like Laurie more than they like me. Of course, if you look at it objectively, there is no reason why I should ever get precheck. Millions of people don't get it. It is the norm to not get it. Yes, but this is ME, you see. And life is about ME. I should get precheck because, well, because I'm ME!

And that is the unfortunate default of the human condition. Our starting point, our baseline, is that life is really about us. I can force myself to think objectively about TSA and admit that I have been treated fairly, but it doesn't *feel* that way because down at the core of my being I think life revolves around me. Intellectually I know this is not so, yet, somehow my emotions are driven by the idea that it is so. And my thoughts follow suit, for they are occupied continually with thoughts about me. And I'm not alone in this. If you could somehow study the inner thoughts of every person on the planet to discover what percentage of the human race has this default, you would find that number comes in right at 100%.

There is a problem with that default. It turns out that it is the source of all of the human misery in all of history. Every bit of unkindness, thoughtlessness, insensitivity, cruelty, bigotry, prejudice, and all conflict come right out of that thinking. It all started with a guy named Lucifer, who wanted everything to be about him. And that was the fountain of all the evil in history. He sold the foul idea to the first humans, who passed it on to their descendants so every human since, except for one, has been infected with the virus of that default.

We try to not be dominated by it in our better moments. But it is so deeply ingrained in us it subtly persists and in hidden ways affects even the good things we try to do. It is stubborn to a degree it is hard to imagine. I have mentioned before that when I played baseball in my younger days, among many deficits that led to my mostly laughable results, I had a flaw in my swing. It wasn't identified in high school, but my college coaches spotted it. When I swung I got out on my front foot. The problem with this is that power comes from your lower body, and I was taking my lower body out of the equation. I would hit ball, but mostly with arm strength, so I had no power. In college, for the two years I played, they had me work on that flaw continually in hitting drills, in the batting cages, in batting practice. And at times in practice I would do it right. But in a real game, in the heat of battle, the default invariably and stubbornly

came back. There was one game in my sophomore year when during one at bat I finally did it all right. I kept my weight back, pivoted, got all my body behind the swing and just crushed the ball. I hit a screaming line drive against the wall in left field for a double. The coach got excited. He jumped up and yelled, “That’s it, Myatt. You got it. That’s the way to swing the bat!” I stood there on second base thinking, “Hot dog. I figured it out. Look out world, here I come.” Next time up, right back out on my front foot. I never was able to consistently fix that problem. Our human default is more stubborn than my little hitting flaw.

What we need to know is that this default is disastrous. Operating by it, even to a tiny extent, will always, without fail, bring misery to people around us in some form and will make us miserable as well. Know this: living by this default always brings misery and never brings joy or peace. Romans 11:36 says of God, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever.” That is one of many verses in the Bible that tell us God is the center of all things. Life isn’t about us, it’s about him. My own life really isn’t my own. As hard as it is for me to believe, it is about God.

This is one huge reason why we need to continually worship and praise God. It puts us back in line with reality. It reminds us of the truth, that God is the center, not me. It honors him as he deserves, and it loosens, at least for a time, the iron grip our default has on our thoughts and emotions.

It gives us hope.

Psalms 25:3 says, “No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame.” Psalm 28:7 says, “The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him.” These verses remind us that we can find peace in God. He is our strength and our shield and putting our hope in him is always a winning proposition.

Unfortunately, life is filled with troubles, obstacles, disappointments and losses. It is stressful. I read recently about an amusement facility in Calgary, Canada, that has just opened a “Rage Room.” They give you protective gear along with golf clubs, baseball bats, sledgehammers and pipes, and you get to go into the room and smash stuff. They allow people to bring stuff in to smash. They say they get a lot of printers brought in. The idea is it provides stress relief.

How stressed out do you have to be to pay money to go into a room and smash a bunch of stuff? I’d say pretty stressed. Life is going to hand us plenty of things that peg our stress meter at the red line. How do we handle this?

Praise is crucial for us. It calls us back to put our hope in God. It reminds us of who he is and how much he loves us. Psalm 42:5 says, “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?” The answer to that question is, “Because I don’t see how I’m ever going to get out

of this mess I'm in. Because it's all piling up on me and I'm pretty sure it's going to crush me." But then the Psalmist comes up with great instruction. "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God." The solution to a downcast, stressed out, weary soul, is to put hope in God.

The central question of life is this: can I trust God? The answer to that question will determine the whole course of your life. Praise is critical in reminding us, yes, we can trust God. We need to be continually reminded of that, because we will continually be assaulted with messages that the answer to that central question of life is no, you can't trust God.

So there are some very good reasons why being filled with the Spirit includes continually praising God. But that brings up the other question. Why singing? Some of us are good singers and really enjoy singing. Others of us, not so much. For most of us karaoke night is not a good night, for we would dread having to get up in front of people and sing (but as awful as that is, it would be better than having to listen to the people who do get up in front and sing!). Yet singing has always been a part of the Christian faith. God commands us to sing, and does so emphatically and repeatedly.

Psalm 33:1 says, "Sing to him a new song, play skillfully and shout for joy." Psalm 47:6 says, "Sing praises to God, sing praises, sing praises to our King, sing praises." (Even if you are not a biblical scholar, I'll bet you could figure out the theme of that verse.) Sing praise! Psalm 147:1 says, "Praise the Lord. How good it is to sing praises to him. How pleasant and fitting it is to praise the Lord." God makes a really big deal out of singing praise to him. Being filled with the Spirit will always involve singing. ...Why singing?

It helps us remember

The Ephesian Christians had no books. They had no cell phones and Google was still in its infancy. For the most part they didn't have writing materials because they were too expensive. The only way they had of remembering things was to actually commit them to memory and...well, remember them. They were better at that than we are. But even so, it was hard for them to remember truths that were quite foreign to their culture.

One of the best ways to teach them truths and help them remember them was to put those truths to music and sing them. It is still a powerful way to help people remember. We have a three-year-old granddaughter who is starting to learn her ABC's. How do we teach kids the alphabet? We teach them a song.

Suppose I gave all of us a quiz today. In order to pass you would need to write out the lyrics to a most familiar song, called, *The Star Spangled Banner*. Could you do it? I suspect you could, but the way you would do it is to sing it. "Oh, say can you see, by the dawn's early light, what

so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming." I'm not sure I could come up with all the words without singing it.

It's amazing how long the words of songs can stick in our heads. Years ago Laurie and I were walking along a street next to an open air restaurant that had a guy playing guitar and singing. As we approached he was singing a familiar song that has the words, "Even though we ain't got money..." We both joined in as we walked by and sang, "I'm so in love with you, honey." The amazing thing is on that busy street everyone we passed was singing that song with him. They knew the words. I suspect most of them could not tell you the name of the song. It is called *Danny's Song*, recorded by Loggins and Messina in 1971. It's almost 50 years old, and people still know the words to it. And almost none of them ever set out to memorize the words. They just stuck in there. Advertising people know the power of songs. You can probably finish the line, "Oh, I wish I were an _____." That's right, an Oscar Mayer Wiener.

We believers often encourage others to memorize Scripture. Most of us have had periods where we've made serious efforts in that regard, but end up frustrated that long term we seem to forget much of what we've memorized. And yet without even trying we remember lyrics to songs for decades. One reason singing is so important is that it implants truth in our brains and hearts in ways nothing else would. It enables us to remember things that we haven't even tried to memorize.

It makes us more conscious of God than self

As I have said, few of us have really good singing voices. The large majority of us range from being able to carry a tune, though not beautifully, to being downright awful. How many things that you are either not very good at or even terrible at do you like to do in public? Not many.

For most of us to sing in public means we simply have to say, "I don't care how I sound. I don't care if I even look slightly ridiculous. God wants me to sing his praise, so I'm going to do that to the best of my ability." We must choose to care more about honoring God than about how we might look and others might think of us. We will have to focus on being before God rather than on ourselves and what people think of us.

It brings us together

As I was helping Carissa go through the stuff in the room they were clearing out to become the new nursery, we came across a squadron song book. Our son-in-law, Michael, was a Marine. He spent more than 12 years in the Marines. In addition to being trained to fly a fighter aircraft he was trained to lead a rifle platoon, qualified as a marksman, trained for a special forces assignment and served a combat tour on the ground in Afghanistan. So though his primary job was to be a fighter pilot, flying an F-18, he was a real Marine in every sense of the word. I was

very surprised to learn that in his fighter squadron they did a lot of singing! Tough Marine fighter pilots do a lot of singing together? Yes, they do.

That song book is not recommended reading. The songs they sang were... let's call them less than edifying. But why would the Marines make a thing out of singing together? Recent research has discovered something someone in the Marines knew long before the researchers figured it out. It is that when we sing with a group of people it creates a sense of common identity and unity. It ties us to the other people. In part God wants us to sing together so that we can be unified!

It touches our souls

Laurie and I recently had our 40th wedding anniversary. At one point we were talking about our years together and reminiscing about how we initially connected with each other. It was not a case of love at first sight. It was, however, a case of something at second sight. Both of us recall the second time we talked to each other and though it seemed unlikely, even at the time a crazy idea, we felt some sort of special spark. It wasn't love, but I remember feeling very strongly, "there is something very special about this girl." I felt drawn to her in an undeniable way, in a way that I had never experienced with anyone else, and she felt the same thing.

Some scientists and scholars try to analyze things like that, maybe break them down to chemical reactions, but the truth is you can't reduce whatever that is to scientific explanation. There is an undefinable part of us, call it our heart or our soul, but it is a part where we feel the deepest, the part where our most powerful passion exists.

I submit to you that when God says he wants us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, he's saying he wants us to love him in that deepest, most passionate part of our being. Think about people whom God called and used. We are told David was a man after God's own heart. David had some spectacular failures in his life. He did some things that were inexcusable, the farthest thing from godly. That thing with Bathsheba was Exhibit A. The thing with her husband, Uriah, was Exhibit B! How could God think he was that great? One of the main reasons, I believe, is that David was passionate. Read his Psalms. He had great passion for God. Yes, his passion caused him trouble, but he was never lukewarm. He was all in. Now think about Peter. He was the king of the tribe of Those-Who-Put-Their-Foot-In-Their-Mouth. But he was the one who would say, "If it's really you walking on that water, Lord, then let me come out and join you." He was passionate.

There are things that touch that indefinable part of us. Beauty is one example. Great stories and art touch us in that place. But music is also a way we can be stirred in our souls in that powerful way. God wants us to sing because he wants to stir that passion in that deepest part of

us. He wants us to love him with that passion in our deepest soul. So part of being filled with the Spirit of Christ involves singing so that our passion for God is awakened and strengthened.

GIVING THANKS ALWAYS

As we are singing to the Lord we should be “always giving thanks to God the Father.” Uh, giving thanks to him for what? “For everything!” Man, there are two words married people are never supposed to use, always and everything. Paul says if you want to be filled with the Spirit your kneejerk reaction to everything that happens at every moment of your life is to give thanks to God! Always!

When Laurie and I had our encounter with a bat and learned we had to get rabies shots, we ended up in a hospital in Dubuque, Iowa. We learned we had to get a series of shots on four separate occasions. The first day in Dubuque after the doctor determined we did, indeed, need rabies shots, two nurses came into the treatment room carrying trays, and on each tray there were five hypodermic needles! Five! I said, “Guess a lot of people are getting shots today, huh?” They said, “No, these are all for you. You each get five shots today.” I said, “Thank you, Jesus!” No, I did not. Was I supposed to be thankful for getting five shots?

When Carissa was discharged from the hospital three days after giving birth to her long-awaited baby, little Wesley had to stay there. And Carissa got a terrible spinal headache as a result of the epidural she received. To be filled with the Spirit, how should she and Michael respond? They could respond by believing for them to have full life, to be at peace and have joy they need to not have things like that happen to them. So they could be discouraged and depressed. They could feel sorry for themselves. They could be mad at God and refuse to honor him or trust him. What that would bring them is sadness, bitterness, fear and discouragement. To be filled with the Spirit the response would have to be giving thanks to God in the middle of all the difficulty.

I read an article about Blake and Wendy Anderson. Blake is the football coach at Arkansas State University. Wendy was his wife whom he loved dearly. She described herself as a Christ follower. She was a vibrant, much loved mother of 3. She was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 47. After a two-year battle, she died in August. Blake was devastated. Is he supposed to give thanks in that? It is part of “everything.” He said, “My beautiful girl has gone home to be with Jesus...Praise God that she hurts no more and is in his presence now and forever more.”

Always and everything? Really? God doesn’t actually expect us to be happy about it and thankful for it when bad things happen. I think we can get some help with this from a preposition Paul used in this sentence. When he wrote that we should give thanks “for everything” the Greek word translated “for” is *huper*. In English it is often rendered hyper, meaning over or beyond. It had, as you can see, a wide range of possible meanings. One of

them is “with reference to.” I think that’s what Paul intended here. Give thanks with reference to everything, not because you are happy the bad thing happened to you or because you’re really grateful for it. But I can be grateful and thankful to God with reference to everything that happens in my life, because even though the bad thing has happened it doesn’t mean I’m being punished or judged. I’m still loved by God, and because of that he’s going to somehow bring good out of the thing for me. I can give thanks because my peace and my joy do not depend on circumstances always being happy and favorable, but on God’s promises and on the fact that I have eternal life. Paul is making the point that there is always a reason to thank God, even in the worst moments of our lives.

If we are to be filled with the Spirit of Christ, we will give thanks. What is the result of being filled with the Spirit? It is love, joy, peace, and all the rest of the fruit of the Spirit. In the end, if we want joy, if we want to have a peaceful, happy life, we will have to choose a constant spirit of gratitude, of expressing our thanks to God.

Harvard psychologist, Shawn Achor cites a study on giving thanks. Subjects were asked to take five minutes at the same time every day and write down three things they were thankful for. The things could be trivial or significant, whatever they wanted. They were to do this for one week. Follow up studies one month later revealed that those who practiced this habit of gratitude were happier and less depressed than people in the control group, even if they had only continued it for one week. Remarkably, further follow-ups at three months showed they were still more joyful at that point. Incredibly it was true even six months later. Just writing down three things for which they were thankful, for as little as a week, caused people to be more joyful six months later! What do you think it will do for us if we are always thankful in everything?

Elie Wiesel survived some of the worst that humans can endure when he survived a Nazi concentration camp. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey he said that to this day the words that most frequently come to his lips are “thank you.” He said, “When a person doesn’t have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity. A person can almost be defined by his or her attitude toward gratitude. For me, every hour is grace.”

In a commencement speech in 2015, actor Denzel Washington said, “Everything I have is by the grace of God. Understand that. It’s a gift... So say thank you. Thank you for grace, thank you for mercy, thank you for understanding, thank you for wisdom, thank you for parents, thank you for love, thank you for kindness, thank you for humility, thank you for peace, thank you for prosperity.”

CONCLUSION

Do you want to be filled with the Spirit? The answer is yes you do, because the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control, and that's the life you want. As we saw last week that means looking to Christ for life, seeking the Spirit of Jesus to give you what you need. So here are two simple ways of doing that:

Sing praise to God for all you are worth. Sing like every day is karaoke day. Live a karaoke life. The more you do it, the more you will be filled with the Spirit.

Give thanks. Thank God always and for everything!