

## **I Corinthians 6:12-20, John 1:35-51    *Toward a More Perfect Union***

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

January 17, 2021

The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

### **1 Corinthians 6:12-20 (CEB)**

I have the freedom to do anything, but not everything is helpful. I have the freedom to do anything, but I won't be controlled by anything. Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, and yet God will do away with both. The body isn't for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. God has raised the Lord and will raise us through his power. Don't you know that your bodies are parts of Christ? So then, should I take parts of Christ and make them a part of someone who is sleeping around? No way! Don't you know that anyone who is joined to someone who is sleeping around is one body with that person? Scripture says, *The two will become one flesh*. The one who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him. Avoid sexual immorality! Every sin that a person can do is committed outside the body, except those who engage in sexual immorality commit sin against their own bodies. Or don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you? Don't you know that you have the Holy Spirit from God, and you don't belong to yourselves? You have been bought and paid for, so honor God with your body.

### **John 1:35-51**

<sup>35</sup> The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, <sup>36</sup>and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' <sup>37</sup>The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup>When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' <sup>39</sup>He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. <sup>40</sup>One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.

<sup>43</sup> The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." <sup>44</sup> Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup> Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." <sup>46</sup> Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." <sup>47</sup> When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

<sup>48</sup> Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." <sup>49</sup> Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" <sup>50</sup> Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." <sup>51</sup> And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you,<sup>[a]</sup> you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

\*\*\*\*\*

This is a "come to Jesus" sermon.

Two of John the Baptist's followers have just witnessed Jesus' baptism and heard John's words about Jesus, so they follow Jesus to find out more. They ask Jesus where he's staying, and Jesus says, "Come and see."

Another disciple, Philip, tries to recruit his friend Nathanael, and when Nathanael is skeptical, Philip repeats Jesus' own words: "Come and see."

Come and see. Wise words to anyone who is looking to start a relationship or join a movement—first, see what that person does. See what that movement produces. Don't just rush in, don't just jump on board—do your vetting, so you know whether this is someone or something with which you want to be involved.

And beyond that, monitor how your proximity to *them* is affecting *you*.

This is something I ask couples in pre-marital counseling: How has this relationship changed you? Has it made you feel more grounded, more confident? Has it made you more patient, more kind, more self-giving? If so, then great!

But if, instead, the relationship has diminished your self-worth, if it's made you insecure and uncertain, or more mean and sarcastic, or more volatile, jealous, or possessive—then you'd better think very carefully about whether to move forward.

Paul agrees that who we're with affects who we are: "Don't you know," he says, "that anyone who is joined to someone who is sleeping around is one body with that person?" This particular passage from 1 Corinthians isn't one of my go-to's. I'm a little leery of all the stuff about sexual immorality, partly because it's been applied so unevenly. I recently watched the Netflix series, "Bridgerton," and it's maddening how a man can hang out at brothels and still be the most eligible bachelor in town, while if a woman is spotted just talking to a man by herself, she is ruined. The double standard may not be quite that extreme anymore, but it's still around.

Nevertheless, this is one of our lectionary passages for the week, and when I read the whole thing, it struck me how much Paul's words resonate for the time we're in right now.

First, he begins with that powerful statement about freedom: "I have the freedom to do anything, but not everything is helpful." No kidding. All around us, we've seen people refusing to wear masks, refusing to curtail their social activities, like stubborn adolescents saying "You can't make me."

It's mind-blowing to think about members of Congress, huddled together in fear of the mob, still refusing to don masks, even when those around them were begging them to. All of this in the name of "freedom." As though freedom were a license to kill.

I can't believe most of these people have always acted like that. Who have they joined themselves to, that has brought out the worst in them? Many of them claim to be Christians, but this attitude did not come from Jesus.

When Paul tells us not to join ourselves to immoral people, he may sound prudish, but he's right in reminding us that our bodies are not just our own. What we do with our bodies affects other people. And who we join ourselves to—whether sexually or socially or politically or theologically—does affect us.

Join yourself to kind people, just people, people with self-control and integrity—and those attributes will rub off on you.

Join yourself to someone who lies and boasts and degrades others, and you will be degraded. Surely this pandemic has taught us that: we don't even shake hands anymore, because of what we might take away from the contact.

So, before you get too close to anyone, go and see what they're about, and then decide if you want to be with them.

A Facebook friend shared a post that gave one helpful way of assessing a group.

They wrote:

I have found that in times of political confusion, particularly when emotions are running high and creating tunnel vision, the presence of Nazis can be an extremely helpful indicator.

If I am attending a local demonstration or event and I see Nazis...neo-Nazis, casual Nazis, master race Nazis, or the latest-whatever-uber-mythology-Nazis, I figure out which side they are on.

And if they are on my side of the demonstration? I am on the wrong side.

What signs do you look for in a movement or a relationship? What behaviors do you monitor in yourself, in order to decide if it's bringing out your best?

On this Martin Luther King, Jr., weekend, I can't help but compare the madness of last week's crowd with the dignity of the March on Washington. I can't help but compare the mindless

violence of that mob of a couple of thousand with the restraint and self-control of the quarter of a million people who filled the nation's capital all those years ago—people who actually *had* been abused and denied what was rightfully theirs, but who, instead of lashing out, called upon the highest ideals of this nation and of their faith, and asked others to join them in creating the more perfect union that our founders first proclaimed. Who we join ourselves to matters, because it changes us for better or for worse.

But here's the good news: even though we unwisely join ourselves to people who bring out our worst, Christ has joined himself to us, in order to bring out our best. Paul says, "Don't you know that your bodies are parts of Christ?" Not that they *could* be, but that they *are*. We are already part of a union that can make us more perfect.

But every union takes nurture. Every union takes commitment. Every union takes time and attention to flourish.

That's why, like Philip and Nathanael, we need to come to Jesus.

We need to see what Jesus is about. It's what we do every year--cycling through Jesus' life story. Every year, we listen to the words he speaks. Every year, we observe his actions. Every year, we get to see how he affects those around him—because that's the real evidence of who he is.

And here's the other good news: even before we did that, even before we even thought about coming to Jesus, Jesus came to us. It's hard to know why he bothered—but Jesus saw something worthwhile in us. Something good in us. Something worth saving.

And he still does, even now

.

So let's lean into that union, and be changed. Let's become more and more like him, more and more like our better selves. Let's be transformed so profoundly through his spirit that others will sit up and take notice.

Who knows? Maybe they, too, will want to come and see what he's all about.