

Holy Living

Romans 11:16

Sermon transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

What do you think about earlier church services in summertime? Do you think we should switch the service from eleven o'clock to nine o'clock? I thought it's not a bad idea and I really do think there are a lot of good reasons that people have for doing it. I wasn't happy some years ago with my own reasons, and that's probably why I am not too enthusiastic about it in my own life. I think there are a lot of good reasons, but my reason was not a good reason. My reason was that I wanted to get church over as early as possible so that I could get out and enjoy the rest of the day doing what I wanted to do with it.

Now I'm sure that you Minnesota Lutherans and Baptists and Presbyterians and Catholics would not dream of that! But this miserable Irish Methodist did dream of it. I wasn't sure what was wrong with it, but it just didn't feel right to me. It seemed the way I thought when I was a little guy: let's get the nasty medicine over so that we can get on with the ice cream that Mom promised us. It seemed to be something along those lines. I felt there is something inappropriate in trying to get the religious stuff over as early as you can so that you can get on with the stuff that really matters.

Yet, loved ones, I must admit I didn't really understand intellectually what was wrong with my attitude, and that it was my attitude that was wrong rather than the time of the service. I didn't understand that until I began to study the principle by which God deals with all of us. It's a vital principle that's outlined in today's verse. Romans 11:16a: "If the dough offered as first fruits is holy, so is the whole lump." It's known as the principle of the first fruits.

Here's the logic our Maker used. He said, "What have you got that you haven't received? Did you make your own hands? Did you make your brain? Did you even create your job? Did you make your feelings and your emotions? Did you give yourself eyesight so that you can see flowers and touch cool water?" In other words, your hands, your eyes, even the cool water, every plant, every tree belongs not to you and me at all, but to God. Everything belongs to him. None of it belongs to us at all.

So he said to Abraham and Moses and the first men and women to whom he revealed himself at the beginning of time, "Look! When you harvest a field of grain, take the first sheaf that you harvest and give it to your wife, and she will bake out of that first sheaf some dough. Then take out of that lump of dough another piece and give it to me to express to me that you know that I own all the grain in all the fields, and I own all the dough that is ever made. I own everything that you see. Do that!"

It's kind of interesting that the purpose of the first fruits was to declare to God that you realized that everything was his anyway! He could have had the lot! In fact, he didn't need to give us anything. It wasn't that you give the first fruits to him as something to palm him off. But it was that you give the first fruits, a piece of the first dough of the first sheaf of grain, to tell him, "Look, I know it's all yours anyway. You're God. Any time you want -- you can have it."

Now loved ones, that runs through all of the material life of the Old Testament. Look at it in Leviticus 27:30: "All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the

trees, is the Lord's; it is holy to the Lord."

Tithe means a tenth. So God said, "All your income – divide it in ten – and give me a tenth of it. Set apart a tenth of it for me." That's what it means from the human side to make a thing holy. You set it apart for God's use. You determine not to use it as you want but you say, "Lord, whatever way you want to use it, you can use it that way." So God said, "Set a tenth of your money apart for my uses -- not to be used for your own purposes at all -- to let me know that you know fine well that the other nine-tenths in your pocket are mine also -- and to let me know that as far as you are concerned, they're there when I need them."

Now loved ones, it wasn't this deal of giving a tenth as a kind of token payment or to pay the guy off, or to enable him to kind of pretend that we'd given the whole nine-tenths. It wasn't that kind of deal at all. It wasn't the idea that we give him a tenth and somehow magically he'll make the rest holy as well. It wasn't that! It wasn't the part instead of the whole. It was the part representing the whole. It was giving a tenth to God to tell him, "Look, I know it is all yours. And as far as my heart and my attitude are concerned, you can have the directing of it all. That's why I am giving this particular tenth to you."

That's when I began to waken up in regard to my attitude to early morning church services. I began to see what God also said was, "Every minute that you breathe – that last second you had -- is because I am holding the protons and neutrons together. If I released my power, in a moment you would explode apart and disappear. Every second that you have – that last second that you had -- is mine. I gave it to you. You experienced it because I have upheld things for another second. Every moment, every hour, every day, every week, every month, every year you have, every decade -- all time is mine."

Then he set forth the principle of the first fruits. Would you look at it? It's in Exodus 20:8: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates."

God said, "I want you to give me one day out of every seven -- to show me that you know that every day is mine and to show me that you want every day to be given to me. I want you to give me the seventh day to express to me your own recognition that every moment you have is due to my kindness and generosity to you."

Then he said, "If you do that, the peace and the appropriateness of a right relationship like that between the creature and the Creator will enable a great peace to fill your other days. The beauty and the joy of Sunday will spill over into the other days. The whole order and peace that you experience on a Sunday will begin to touch all the other days in your life as well. In fact, I want Sunday to be a pattern for all your other days."

Well, loved ones, it just struck me in my conscience that that was not my attitude to Sunday at all. I wanted to squeeze into as early an hour as possible the God-stuff on Sunday -- so that I could make the rest of Sunday as much like Saturday as possible. I wasn't really interested in Sunday touching the other days and making the other days like it. I was interested in making Sunday as much like the other days as possible.

I suddenly saw that the whole attitude that I had was not an attitude of reality between me and my Creator. It wasn't an attitude that really recognized that all my money and all my time had come from him. It wasn't! I didn't really believe that at all! I was just trying to palm something off to keep him quiet so that I could get on with my life.

Then I saw that a lot of us do that. A lot of us are just dumb! We are miserable in our own lives with God because that's our stingy attitude. The fact is that the first move you make toward God --- maybe you start coming to church or you start reading the Bible or you start believing in Jesus --- that first move is "first fruits." The purpose of the first fruits, and the reality and integrity and validity of the first fruits depends on your readiness to give your whole life to God. That's what the first fruits means.

They have no validity if they don't mean that. If you come to church just to keep the guy quiet or to just to keep him off your back, really, it means nothing. The first move towards God is only a real move if it is a declaration: "Lord, I want to give my whole life to you."

But of course, my attitude had not been that, and I think that many of us have that same feeling. We make a move towards God -- start coming to God, start reading the Bible -- hoping that that will keep him off our back and that he won't meddle any further in our lives, and above all, that that first move will not spill over into other parts of our lives that we are perfectly able to control ourselves. Loved ones, that's why so many of us are such miserable Gentiles, such miserable Jews, such miserable churchgoers, such miserable Christians, such miserable Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, or Catholics. That's why so many are so miserable. That's why so many of us know only religion but we know nothing of God -- because we try to make do with some first fruits that we palm off to him -- and then refuse to go any further.

So the first move that we make to him is useless. So for some of us, a friend dies or a relative dies, and we begin to think seriously about life and about God. Or maybe we start coming to church or we start believing that Jesus is our Savior. Loved ones, at that very moment there develops inside you an untamable carnal heart that is intent on a battle of containment for that first surrender.

That's it. There develops at that very moment, an untamable -- almost an incomprehensible carnal heart inside you -- that is dedicated to keeping that initial surrender from going any further. It's exactly that that means that we are being dishonest with God -- that our first fruits are not really first fruits -- and that prevents God filling our whole lives with his joy and his victory.

It's as if Jesus comes to the door of our hearts and knocks saying, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and sup with him and he with me." And we say, "Yes, I would like the joy of having my sins forgiven and being rid of the guilt. I would like to know that I'm going to go heaven after this life is over. Yes, Lord, I give my life to you and I ask you to come in."

Jesus comes in, and comes just in to that little porch, and begins to deal with just some of the actions in our life. He deals with just some of the words, and we begin to change them. We stop swearing. We stop stealing. We stop being dishonest. We stop a lot of the things that are wrong in our lives.

But loved ones, so many of us want to hold that Spirit of God that has entered us -- on the porch of

our lives. We don't want him to come any further. The fact is, the Spirit of God always deals with us according to the principle of the first fruits. That's right! In other words, the first move you make is a real move and has real integrity to it, if it expresses your readiness to give your whole life to God.

But the moment that you begin to back off and try to hold that surrender to just the religious part of your life, that moment, the first move has become invalid. So many of us say, "Yes, I prayed to receive Jesus with Campus Crusade" or, "I was confirmed," or "I have begun to think very seriously about God -- but there's no doubt that I have trouble in the rest of my life. There are things that I can't do and that I haven't victory in." Loved ones, it's because you're bluffing God on this business of first fruits. You're not prepared to carry on doing what you said you'd do, which is, "Lord, I surrender to you the things that you've shown me are wrong in my life -- because I want to surrender all my life to you."

But so often, loved ones, we want to hold it there. God's Spirit never rests that way. He moves through the front door and into the entrance hall. He begins to point out to you, "Now, you've cleaned up the outside of your life. Now what about the inside of your heart? When you do things for people, do you do them because you really want to do it from your heart, or do you do it with a great deal of selfishness still inside, thinking, 'Boy, how am I going to get along without that?'"

"When you are friends of people or when you love people, are you clear of any fear of what they'll do to you? Have you really allowed me to take over your reputation and what people think of you, or are you concerned about what people say about you or what people can do to you?" God's Spirit begins to touch us there. Loved ones, the truth is that unless you come through with a "Yes" in these areas, the whole first experience is negated and invalidated -- because it was just a bluff thing, and the Father sees that. So the first fruits is only meaningful if you keep moving in that direction.

Many of us do. Many of us deal with that whole relationship with people in the entrance hall. Then God moves always into the place where we spend our days. He moves in there where you have pride.

He says, "All right. You can do your job. You are competent. But what about the pride you have there? What about the way you speak offhandedly to people because you are good and you are proud of your abilities? Will you let me begin to be myself in you, instead of making me out to be a monster the way you do at work? Will you deal with the area of dishonesty that there is in your income tax return? Will you deal with the area of dishonesty in your business commissions? Will you let me clean that thing up and control it and direct it?"

Loved ones, God's Spirit is unerring. He knows exactly where you and I are trying to keep part of our lives under our own control. He deals with the love of praise that we have from our boss or from our colleagues.

He says, "Really -- are you doing your business for the money you get? Are you doing your job for the praise you get from your colleagues -- or are you doing it as unto me? Do you do your job because I've given you this job and I've given you the ability to do it?"

Loved ones, the amazing thing is that if you don't come into a clean heart in regard to those things, you will eventually find that you're driving Jesus and the Spirit of God right out of even the religious side of your life. In other words, you cannot corral him. He is a free Spirit and he

moves wherever he wants, because he has that right.

So he moves into the area where we spend our leisure time. He begins to touch us at the realm of our laziness. He begins to say, "Now you think that it doesn't matter that you are lazy at times. You feel, in fact, that you can surrender to me on other things if you can only keep this dear little laziness or this little bit of self-indulgence that you have. Or if you can cry yourself to sleep at night thinking of how the world is mistreating you. You are prepared to give me all kinds of things if you can do that. But do you see? If you can do that, it is not me that is living in the center of your heart. It is your great big self that is really wanting to control things in your leisure time."

So God's Spirit will deal with you on worry. You know we are all big babies. We encourage each other: "Oh, you poor soul, you are worrying. Oh, what a terrible thing! You ought to take some tranquilizers and stop that worrying. That miserable father that used to worry and you inherited his worry. Oh, you poor little worrywart!"

Really, worry is a sin, loved ones. I was a worrier, so I know it is a sin. We worry about tomorrow because we want to live tomorrow today, and we can't. God has arranged life that way. He has arranged it so that he will take care of tomorrow anyway. So worry is really a determination that we'll work it out ourselves. So worry is a sin. It is an expression of self's determination to be independent.

Then God always gets into that realm -- not the religious life where you're blasting out the hymn and everyone thinks how wonderful you are, but your private prayer life -- which is virtually non-existent. He begins to get in there at the realm of the deadness in your private prayers.

He begins to show you, "You know you haven't really come under me there. There is a great carnal heart inside you that produces that deadness and dryness when you sit down to do Bible study. There's a lack of power in your whole prayer life. Don't you see that I want to come in and I want to take over your religious life? You are running it for me. You're a religious person. You're doing things for me! I want to come in and take over your life and then you will be a "Christ-ian" person. You'll be a Christ-filled person." God's Spirit begins to deal with us there.

Then he moves into the big family room where we spend so much of our time. He begins to show us the anger that we show with our loved ones. We say, "We're angry with those we love the most," but it's not true. We're angry with those we ought to love the most. We don't love them the most. That's why we're angry. We take them for granted and we treat them more harshly than we would treat our friends.

We're often on our best behavior with our boss but we're on our worst behavior with the loved ones that we live with. God begins to come in there and show us the impatience that there is in our home life, and the touchiness, where we're so ready to judge what they're saying and prejudge what they mean and intend. We interpret their innuendoes, not their words.

Then he begins to show us the criticism that there is in our family life, the way we want to draw attention to ourselves and make ourselves seem important to them by the way we boast about the things we do during the day. God's Spirit just says to us, "That is gross! That is gross ugliness! It is that kind of thing that destroys my Spirit in your life. Now are you going to let it go?" Many of us do and we move on.

Then he moves on into the lounge and deals with the things that we practice in our relationships with our friends, in social relationships – the jealousy, and the exaggeration, and the lack of love and the love of ease. God's Spirit begins to show us, "I want to change all those things. I want to displace self completely from your life so that only I live -- Jesus of Nazareth."

Many of us get that far and we actually do a good bit of cleaning ourselves. The power of positive thinking helps, and some renewal of the mind helps. Then if you belong to enough Bible study groups you can control some of this stuff. So, many of us get pretty far there.

Then Jesus' Spirit says, "What about the other room?" And we say, "What other room? That's all the rooms that there are. You've been in them." He says, "No, the other room." He moves unerringly to the back door. We have moved all the stuff out of all these rooms into this closet – back here {pointing behind him} -- because our idea is that whenever he gets out the door we will get it all, back again!

God's Spirit comes and says, "It's your right -- even to be jealous. That's I want you to give over to me. It's your right -- even to be angry. That's what I want you to give over to me. In other words, when I first came into your life or first invited you to come to me, my intention was always this from the very beginning -- that I would come and take over all your life. I would take over that self that is on the throne of your life and would displace it with my own self and my own ideas and my own plans. Only when you let that old self die on my cross will you begin to experience the brightness and the delight of a Christian experience with God -- instead of a religious experience."

Loved ones, that's the truth. The principle of the first fruits is that the first move that you make toward God is only as good as the continuing surrender that you express to him throughout your life. The moment you begin to fight him on some of these issues, that moment you're beginning to invalidate and to spoil and to expose as counterfeit the first fruits that you presented to him at the beginning.

I would encourage you – I don't think the big deal is the crisis experience. I don't think the big deal is what you interpret the baptism of the Holy Spirit to be. I think the big deal is: are you holding God out of part of your life that he has shown you? If you are doing that, however tiny you are compared with this massive God -- you are standing in God's way and you are saying, "Thus far and no further." That's what prevents the joy of his heart filling your heart. Really, that's it.

So I don't know that it's big arguments about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or a crisis, or all that kind of thing – and those are all important. I think the big issue is: are you really continuing to act in consistency with the first-fruits move that you made towards God? Or are you now involved in exposing that as counterfeit and negating the move that you made by refusing to let God into some area of your life?

I do pray that the Holy Spirit will give you light. I do pray that you'll see that God says to us, "Be ye holy, for I am holy. Don't mess about. Don't say I'm here to overlook your unholiness. I'll do that as much as I need to, but here's my big command to you. Be like me. Be joyful like my Son Jesus. That's what holiness means. Be loving like my Son Jesus. Be filled with life and vitality like my Son Jesus. Be filled with unselfishness like my Son Jesus -- because he can fill you with himself." Loved ones, that's what God has called us to. That's what this world desperately needs -- people who are holy outside and inside. Let us pray.

Dear Father, thank you for the clarity of your dear Word. Thank you for the consistency of the principles upon which you've dealt with us down through the centuries. Thank you that you are the same yesterday, today, and forever, and that you never change. That you, who are the God of the whole universe, are saying to us, "Will you let me be your God? God of everything in your life. God of everything that you do and think and say."

Lord, thank you. Thank you that that is our reasonable service. We would pray that some of us today will complete that first move we made with you, by giving over everything into your control. And now the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with each of us, now and evermore. Amen.