

August 19, 2018
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15, Year B, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

1 Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14
Psalm 111
Ephesians 5:15-20
John 6:51-58

Let's return to today's reading from Ephesians.

Be careful then how y'all live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as y'all sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in y'all's hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹

Please be seated.

That was today's reading from Ephesians as translated in the Y'all Version of the Bible. Yes, that's a real thing, online at www.yallversion.com. Go there, and you can choose not just the Southern "y'all" but also "youze guys," said to be offered up for New Yorkers, "yinz," for Pittsburghers, and more.

I learned about the Y'all Version earlier this week, in an article in *The Christian Century*.² Catching a whiff of gimmick, my first reaction was an eye-roll. A couple of breaths later, the air cleared, and I had to concede the author's point.

The point is this: the Bible originated in Hebrew and Greek, languages with different pronouns for *you-singular* and *you-plural*. But the English pronoun *you* is used for both *you-singular* and *you-plural*. Therefore the pronoun choices of the scriptural authors get lost in our translations. This almost certainly affects our understanding of the texts. If we want to understand better, then maybe we need to hear some *y'alls*. And we might as well begin with Ephesians.

The New Testament includes a total of thirteen letters originally attributed to Paul. Scholars agree that, in fact, seven of these letters were written by Paul, and three were *not* written by Paul. That leaves three letters about which scholars disagree, though the majority believes that they were *not* authored by Paul.

Ephesians belongs to this latter category: it claims authorship by Paul, but Paul probably did *not* write it. Ephesians was probably written at least 50 years later than Paul's letters. It's likely that a follower of Paul wrote the letter in his name, which was then a common and accepted practice.

For the most part, each of Paul's letters addresses a particular community in response to particular conflict within that community. In contrast, Ephesians contains a more general message likely intended for general distribution to many young churches. Times had changed. The author of Ephesians interpreted Paul's message for those changed times.

Times are always changing. Fifteen years ago, Gene Robinson was awaiting consecration as Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire. Bishop Robinson will forever be known primarily for being the first *out* gay bishop in the Anglican Communion. Note my emphasis on the word *out*. The people of New Hampshire elected him in July 2003, the General Convention consented in early August, and by this date a firestorm was raging.

These days the firestorm is a slow burn, but we're still living with the larger questions. Maybe we always will, because the issue at heart is deeper than any single demographic. Ten years ago, after being the only Anglican bishop not invited to the last Lambeth Conference, Bishop Robinson offered this:

... by the leading of [the Holy] Spirit, we are beginning to welcome those who have heretofore been marginalized or excluded altogether: people of color, women, the physically challenged, and God's children who happen to be gay. This is the God I know in my life—who loves me, interacts with me, teaches and summons me closer and closer to God's truth. This God is alive and well and active in the church—not locked up in scripture 2,000 years ago, having said everything that needed to be said, but rather still interacting with us, calling us to love one another as [God] loves us.³

If we are open to it, one of the ways that God interacts with us is through scripture. Today's passage from Ephesians is a beautiful portion of a lengthy instruction about how to be a Christian in community. Ephesians is different from Paul's letters, but it's also similar, in that it *is* about Christian community. It's about the church. You might say that it's about *you-singular* in the context of *you-plural*. If we listen carefully, we might hear it speak to us and to our lives today. It urges us to Christian unity, schools us on living lives worthy of our call to God through Christ, exhorts us to intentional relationships, and reminds us to be grateful for the gift of life.

Maybe it's because I'm from the south, but I'm a fan of the word *y'all*. That's because, once you get used to having a *plural-you*, it's hard to give it up. Maybe that's just as well, because the times are *always* changing. The times are always changing, and, when it comes down to it, that's probably as it should be. With change comes opportunity.

The *y'all* is us, and it is so much more. God is always calling to us to *embrace* the *y'all*, and God is always challenging us to *enlarge* our *y'all*. This church, this Christian community, this band of Jesus-followers, is but a miniature representation of something much larger. When the time comes, during our Eucharistic celebration, look around our circle. Look at what's there, and then imagine what it represents and what it foreshadows. God calls us to make the circle complete.

“... be filled with the Spirit, as y’all sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in y’all’s hearts, giving thanks to God ... at all times and for everything in the name of ... Christ.”⁴

Notes

¹ The Y’all Version online does not offer the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. To create this NRSV equivalent, I used the Ya’ll Version prompts, substituting “y’all” for the plural “yous” in the NRSV translation of Ephesians.

² J. Nicole Morgan, “Body shaming tears apart the body of Christ,” July 24, 2018, *The Christian Century*, available online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/body-shaming-tears-apart-body-christ> (accessed August 18 2018).

³ Gene Robinson, “Face to Faith,” *The Guardian*, 12 July 2008; available online at www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jul/12/anglicanism.religion.

⁴ See note 1.