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Gottesdienst**

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Text: Epheser 4,22-32

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
Amen

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ!

“I would never resign being a member of the Lutheran church, not because of its morals or of its values, but because you Lutherans have wonderful churches in which I sometimes go to sit there for a while. I need a church for meditation, for praying.” Unexpectedly a 60 year old man has told me this personal confession. And he has gone on saying: **“Don’t deliver moralizing sermons.** You, pastors, do this always and that is the reason why I don’t like to attend your services.” I can understand this man. I don’t like to listen to moralizing sermons, too. They make me annoyed and often angry. So I was not very happy about this verses from the letter to the Ephesians – 17 moral warnings and demands, do this and don’t do

that. This part of the letter is a moralizing sermon. But is a moralizing sermon not expected by many people when they attend a service?

There are other voices than the voice of the 60 year old man, which says “I don’t like moralizing sermons in church.” Voices who emphasize very strongly that a society needs the churches, needs a Christian grounding, because of the Christian morals, decency, manors and behaviour. Christianity, religion is necessary that people behave. **If religion has any benefit than for morality.** In these days it is suddenly very popular that especially politicians ask the churches to be the conscience of our society. Religious education in schools that kids learn “the” values – what ever “the” values may be. That people don’t kill each other, that somebody helps an old wife to cross the street, or buys a newspaper from a home less person or donates for hungry kids on Christmas – therefore a sermon should encourage the listeners. But nobody really wants to listen to such moralizing sermons.

I think many people don’t care about all this moral warnings and demands because we hear our own mothers and fathers, our grandparents, teachers, pastors who tried to teach us morality, decency, manors and behaviour. “A good girl never contradicts adults, never smokes, never eats with fingers, never

lies.” A good boy never steals, never is a coward, never disrespects old people, never solves conflicts with his fists.” I’m sure everybody of you will hear now the voice of his mother or father and their “never do this” and “always do that”. And if we are honest, we are often proud that we don’t care about the “don’ts” and “dos” of our parents. There are so many “dos” and “don’ts” – some are contradictory, we seem to get lost in them. And is it really morally better for a girl never to contradict adults or for a boy never to act like a coward? Questions about morals, manors, decency and behaviour are always difficult to solve, raise often more questions than answers and the alternatives to act are often numerous. Many people feel lost and without orientation in our world and in our society who offers a life full of complexity and ambiguity. **We don’t know what to do** – politicians and all kinds of experts tell us that we need reforms – to get more employment, to cope up with the global market. We need reforms of our social security and health systems, to decrease our debts, to keep the future open, but many people feel that there are many different ways of changing, but nobody knows the right way. We listen to all the politicians and experts like people listened for hundreds of years to moralizing sermons – and don’t change too much, a little bit, may be.

In the letter to the Ephesians we are asked “**to act just**” – but what does justice mean in a special situation? My grandmother wanted always to be just towards her four children and therefore she sometimes measured the cake with a stick to get pieces all the same size. But three of her four kids thought even when they were grown up that my grandmother wasn’t just. It seemed to them that she loved one of her daughters more. Because this daughter was sick, she got more attention, more care, more help. If this is true – may be my grandmother acted just against this daughter.

What does a **just wage or salary** mean? Is it just when a worker of general motors gets not even a hundreds of the salary of a top manager? Is it just that soccer players, actresses get millions of Dollars while others couldn’t pay for a movie or soccer play ticket? Many people work honestly with their own hands, like Ephesians demands, but their salary is so low that it is not enough for their own family. They can’t not share it with the needy, like Ephesians demands. There are no simple solutions in a situation where in Germany we are told that our salary has to go down because of the global market. But the global market is producing goods, which more and more people even in Germany can not afford anymore. I’m not sure if it is morally fair and just to say we have to work more and to earn

less, so that people need two or three jobs to earn enough money for a family.

“Our talk shall be useful for building up, as there is need”, is also demanded in Ephesians. What shall we tell to a woman beaten by her man – shall she stay with him because of their children? What shall we tell to a man whose wife can’t stop drinking alcohol – shall he try to help her again and again? Ethical challenges everywhere and every time and **no simple solution**. We longing for simple solutions, for clarity, but there are complexity and ambiguity.

But we need a solution, because we have to act in one way or another. Therefore people ask for an answer, for orientation, for steps to go. And people know, we need a lot of ethics to solve all the actual problems. Justice, fairness, taking up responsibility, peacefulness, willingness for reconciliation is needed to open up a good life for many people. A lot of people expect that church, that faith can offer orientation. They expect sermons on ethics. They are asking for books on decency, but books alone don’t help. Warnings and demands, “dos” and “don’ts” are not enough **they need a grounding**.

I myself need a grounding to be able to act on an ethical basis. **I need power and strength, I need courage and confidence, aims and hope**. I need

power and courage to tell the father that I don’t tolerate when he is beating his children - even when I’m only a neighbour. I need confidence, aims and hope for a changing of church structures and tasks not only because of declining church tax. Ethics need power and strength, courage and confidence, aims and hope. Therefore all moralizing sermons from all church pulpits don’t help – they are hanging in the air.

Sermons can only empower morality, if sermons empower the faith. From faith all Christian morals and values arise. The warnings and demands of the letter to the Ephesians arise from the faith of the writer.

I myself have only power, courage and hope to act according to ethical guidelines because of my believe. **My believe in Jesus Christ empowers** me to go in little steps on the way of justice and fairness, the way of respecting the other. My believe in Jesus Christ **encourages** me to take up responsibility in church, responsibility for others, to resist injustice. My believe in Jesus Christ **gives me hope**, that there are ways out of the present crisis of our society and church.

The verses to the Ephesians are more than a guidance to moral and decency. To demand moral decency alone is overtaxing. Therefore “clothe yourselves with the new self created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” There is an idiom

“fine feathers make fine birds” – clothes can change a lot – a banker in jeans in an important meeting, nobody would assume that he is a banker. A poor woman in a golden robe, everybody would assume she is a famous actress. “Clothe yourselves with a clothing you don’t have made. And you are different.” **God has already made this clothing for you.** A clothing no one can make because it is woven by love and justice. It is a clothing that changes our self – it makes us righteous and holy. Thereby God makes us new, renews us. Believing in Jesus Christ means to wear God’s clothing, to let God do the changing and not to change myself. God himself changes me not moralizing sermons, not my efforts, not my willingness to fulfil ethical standards and norms of decency.

God presents me his new clothing as a gift of love for free– **I wear it and my life begins to change.** I’m not a better woman or man from this moment on, I’m beginning to change, because of God’s love. I don’t give up my old identity totally from one second to another, but I’m already changed basically by faith. This makes it so difficult to be a Christian, we are renewed by God and at the same time we stuck to our old life. We have to experience what it means to wear our new clothing. A poor woman in a golden robe has to learn to move her body like an actress, to talk like an actress – otherwise people will find out that in

reality she is a poor woman. And a hand made suit doesn’t make a successful banker. We have to get a feeling for God’s new clothing which will change our whole life more and more.

God makes us free in our new clothing to give a child the love it needs. **God encourages us** to engage in the question of rebuilding our social system in a way that people who are needy get their rights and help. **God strengthen us** to end a marriage because there are no perspectives and living together is a never ending struggle. **God empowers us** to take up voluntary works and to engage for others. **God gives us hope** to work for changes in church.

Faith determines my acting. There is no part of life which isn’t determined by faith. That frees me from all moralizing sermons. The man, who doesn’t like moralizing sermons, is sitting in churches to pray and to meditate – he knows that faith makes a Christian not the morals. But being a Christian you can act new on an ethical basis. So not only this man has to leave the church and go into the world to confess there what it means to be a Christian and to act according to God’s love– therefore God is “clothing you with the new self created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Amen

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love
of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen