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THE SEVEN “UPS”  
Ephesians 5:14-21

Our passage from Ephesians this morning is the ending of a longer section about what it means to be a Christian, how Christians should conduct themselves, how we should live and act. In a few words, Paul gives us a roadmap for following Christ.

One of my favorite preachers, Jim Forbes, a minister in the black Pentecostal tradition, has suggested that there are seven core teachings in this passage, seven “ups” if you will, that can guide us to faithful discipleship. So the words and ideas this morning are mine, but I am borrowing the scaffolding for this sermon from Jim Forbes. You can give him the credit or the blame for the seven ups.

All right, Paul insists that to begin the Christian journey, we must first of all WAKE UP. That’s the first of the seven ups. Wake up! Wake up to Christ. Wake up to his power and his presence and his claim on human life. Some people wake up to alarm buzzers in the morning, others to radio music. Either way is okay as long as you wake up. Some people wake up to Christ all of a sudden in some dramatic encounter. That’s good. Some people wake up to Christ gradually, slowly growing in faith. That’s good, too. Either way is okay as long as we open our eyes to the glorious truth that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

Paul was not content for the Ephesians to believe that Jesus is merely one wise voice among many, merely another option on the spiritual menu. Bluntly we’re not ready for discipleship if Jesus is simply a figure in an old book, a character in a stained glass window, or somebody our parents believed in. Wake up, says Paul, and the word he uses is one of the common New Testament words for resurrection. Wake up to Christ and take the first step from death to new life.

And the second step is to GET UP! Waking up and getting up are not the same thing. To wake up is to know that a new day is beckoning. To get up is to act on that knowledge. To wake up spiritually is to hear the call of Christ as he says, “Come follow me.” To get up spiritually is to get on our feet and start following, to make a commitment, to cast our lot with Christ.

No need to hammer on the obvious. Wake up! Get up! And then Paul says we’ve got to WISE UP. Says the apostle, “Be careful how you walk, not as unwise people but as wise.” Scholars think that Paul is quoting from an early Christian hymn, perhaps a hymn used to celebrate baptism. The idea of the hymn is that confessing Christ is like coming out of the darkness and into the light. When we commit to Jesus, the light of Christ shines on us. We see things more clearly than before. In other words, we have the opportunity to wise up: to take hold of those things that are worthwhile and leave behind the worthless and the hurtful.

I remember visiting a fellow in the hospital in the aftermath of a heart attack. As we chatted, Tom mentioned that he had stopped smoking. I knew he’d been a heavy smoker, and I said, “I guess that will be hard.” He said, “Not really. When a doctor looks you in the eye and says, ‘You can live or you can smoke,’ that’s an easy choice.”

In that sense the light of Christ opens our eyes, invites us to wise up, to see clearly what builds us up and what tears us down. If we were still living in the dark, there might be some excuse for lying, cheating, vulgarity, using others to get our way. But we’re not in the dark anymore. It’s time we wised up.

Let keep this moving. Wake up! Get up! Wise up! And then we need to CATCH UP! Don’t squander your hours and your weeks. Make the most of the times because the days are evil. What does

that mean: the days are evil? Maybe it means that we live in times filled with suffering, hurt, and need. All around us are friendless people, people chained to jobs they hate or people who'd give anything to have a job, people committing slow suicide with drugs or alcohol, people who don't know the difference between sex and love, people in bitter families, people who never have enough money at the end of the month...

Of course, it's easy to talk about how bad things are; it's another matter entirely to make a difference. We look at the life of Christ and we see what the world ought to be like: compassion for the underdogs, help for the sick, food for the hungry, good news for the poor.

The God Squad wanted to be at the head of the line in providing scholarships for AIDS orphans in Tanzania. The group is funding the first two scholarships from BAPC. Will that fix things in Tanzania? No. Will it make a difference? Yes. It could well make a difference that stretches not just across the years, but across generations.

The days are evil, says Paul. Don't waste time. Catch up! Catch up with your unfulfilled good intentions. Catch up with postponed mission. Catch up with the things you've always meant to do. Catch up with a needy world.

Fifth, SOBER UP! Paul often warns against the abuse of alcohol and that may be his point here. But in the context, I think Paul is suggesting something deeper. Drunkenness is a kind of hiding, a way of escaping. If we really do see the misery around us, and we make an honest effort to catch up with some of that suffering, sometimes we'll get tired. Sometimes we'll get discouraged. Sometimes we'll want to throw in the towel. We'll want to hide from the struggle, creep away and lie down.

But Christians are not quitters or deserters. We sober up and accept our calling, and we also accept the help that comes with this calling. In other words, we FILL UP! We don't fill up on despair and fear and exhaustion; we fill up with the Holy Spirit. If we are filled with that Spirit, we're also filled with hope. Filled with strength. Filled with perseverance. Filled with joy. Filled with life. Filled with Christ. How else are we going to go the second mile? How else will we shoulder the cross? How else can we lift each other up? Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation, but I am with you always, and I have overcome the world." That's a promise you can fill up on!

All right, Christians have got to wake up and get up. We've got to wise up and catch up, sober up and fill up. And then finally we've got to LINK UP! A while back I joined an internet group called Linked-In. Somebody I'd helped on a couple of writing projects emailed me and said, "Will you join Linked-In and become part of my network?" I said, "Sure. Why not?" Then I began to hear from other people on Linked-In asking me to join their networks. So I kept adding more connections, and now I'm linked in with a bunch of folks—and I have no idea why. I don't have a clue why I'm connected to all these people or what we're supposed to be doing for each other.

Maybe the whole thing fails to move me because the linkages I care about are here in the church. I don't really care about being linked in cyberspace; I do care about being linked up in Christ. Notice what Paul says is supposed to happen after we fill up with the Spirit. We're supposed to sing to each other. Psalms, hymns, made-up songs, whatever. And we're supposed to pray together, giving thanks together. And be subject to one another, that is listen to each other, care about each other, care for each other. Put someone else first sometimes.

All that stuff that's supposed to happen after we fill up with the Spirit, it's all group stuff. Maybe you joined the church just because you like Jesus, and now you can't figure out why you're suddenly connected to all these people. So let me explain it. Following Jesus is easier in a family. It's more fun in a family. We learn more and grow more and stretch more when we are part of Christ's family. We give more love and receive more love in a family. Whatever else we have done in the service of Christ, we have not matured in our discipleship, we have not given the Spirit his sway, until we link up with others in Christ.

All right, it's time for the quiz. We're going to see if you've been paying attention. I've repeated those seven "ups" over and over. Now I want you to say them back to me. I'll read a passage and you tell me which up that is. Are you ready?

First of all Paul says, "Awake, O sleeper..." Which up is that? *Wake up!*

And then he says, "Arise from the dead..." What's the second up? *Get up!*

"Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise people, but as wise..." Number three? *Wise up!*

This next one is tricky. "Make the most of the time..." *Catch up!*

"Do not get drunk with wine..." *Sober up!*

"But be filled with the Spirit." *Fill up!*

And finally, "Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, giving thanks to God, and be subject to one another in Christ." What's the seventh up? *Link up!*

This is the word of God that came through Paul to the church of Jesus. Having heard God's word, let us live up to that word.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*