

## Proper 14, Year B

August 9, 2015

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

*So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. **Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.***

In some ways, it could be said that the 2016 Presidential campaign began this past week, with a Forum and a Debate. I recently saw a cartoon of a man and a woman standing in front of a lawn staked out with campaign signs for all the Presidential candidates, Republican and Democrat (there are currently a total of 23!). The man was saying to the woman, "Kill me now." We all know what he means: For the next 15 months, we will be hearing all sorts of negative advertising, as candidates rip into each other. While the negativity of political campaigns has increased over the years, it has always been present. A while back, a reporter on National Public Radio remarked, "No matter the year, negative campaigns are part of America's DNA. During the 1828 presidential race between Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams, Jackson was accused of cock-fighting and cannibalism; his wife was called a prostitute."

Why do good people, who sincerely wish to serve others in public office, wage virtual war on their opponents, slinging mud and slander and vicious attacks on another good person's reputation and character? Why?

Because it works. If negative campaigning did *not* work on us voters, it would not be used – plain and simple. But it *does* work. It has a strong appeal, at some powerful level, to you and me – to our **baser** instincts, not our better angels. And in this age of social media, it is so easy for us to **participate** in all the mud-slinging and sniping by just "liking" or "sharing" or "retweeting" a negative post about some candidate or other person we do not like. We just "pile on."

And yet listen again to the exhortation in today's epistle reading: "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

I wonder if we listen to such teaching at all anymore? Perhaps we think that “separation of Church and State” means that when it comes to politics, living out our faith does not apply, and we can be as vicious and mean-spirited as we want. Perhaps we think that being kind and forgiving is a sign of weakness. When the assassin’s bullets hit his body, Mahatma Gandhi instinctively threw up his hand in the Hindu gesture of forgiveness. Years before, Gandhi had said, “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.” (quoted in *Christianity Today*, vol. 34, #5)

My sisters and brothers, we *must* realize that there is something sinfully wrong with attitudes, words, and behaviors which malign, slander, harbor grudges, or **refuse** to forgive or reconcile. As faithful Christians, we are called to repent of such attitudes, as difficult as that might be.

When Leonardo da Vinci was painting *The Last Supper*, he became angry at a man and lashed out at him, even threatened him. Then he went back to his fresco and tried to paint the face of Jesus. He couldn’t do it, for there was too much bitterness stirring inside him. The lack of peace *forced* him to put down his brushes, go find the man, and ask his forgiveness. Only *then* did he have the inner calm needed to finish the face of Christ. (*Ibid.*) If you are at all like me, we tend *not* to put down our brush, but rather *continue* painting (figuratively, in our minds) the face of our neighbor, with the result that the face of that neighbor, created in the image of God, becomes distorted and hideous because of *our* bitterness.

Why is this?

One reason, I am convinced, is that we human beings yearn to *belong* to some group, some community; and the *easiest* way to build community, as Richard Rohr points out, is to find a common enemy. “My enemy’s enemy is my friend” has long been an axiom on the *global* stage; but it is no *less* true for smaller communities of people. Would there be gangs, if there were not **rival** gangs to be *against*? Would there be such a thing as gossip if nobody wanted to *listen* to something negative said against another person?

It is so much *easier* to demonize someone who has hurt us, and rally others around us who would also like to demonize that person, than it is to build community by forgiving and reconciling with those who have wounded us. Forgiving and reconciling are so much more difficult!

But Jesus never said that being his disciple, a member of his Body, the Church, would be easy. He said that if any would follow him, we must take up our cross. And Jesus’ first word from *his* cross was not a word of judgment or demonization, but of forgiveness. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

We all long to belong! The question is: with *which* community, group, or person will we most strongly identify?

Instead of identifying so strongly with a particular nation, political party, or whatever group of like-minded people we might belong to or gather around us, might we not **most** strongly identify with our sisters and brothers in Christ, since, as our epistle says, “we are all members one of another”? (v. 25) Could we not say, “I do not agree with the views of that political candidate, but he is a brother/sister in Christ, and I refuse to slander her/him”? Both Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders have pledged NOT to run negative campaigns; I hope and pray they abide by their pledges, as examples for us all and a welcome respite from the sea of negativity!

Irish humorist T.P. O’Connor once said about his native land: “Ah, in Ireland the Catholics hate the Protestants and the Protestants hate the Catholics; I wish *to God* they’d both become atheists so they could live together as Christians!”

With which community, group, or person do *you* most strongly identify?

In one of the most audacious statements imaginable, our Epistle today tells us, “Be imitators – *of God(!)*...” [pause] You and I are called to **most** strongly identify *with God*, in whose image we are made, and who calls us to new life in Christ.

Eugene Peterson, in his Bible translation *The Message*, translates the last two verses of our epistle today in this way: “Watch what God does, and then *you* do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents.

“Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn’t love in order to *get* something from us but to *give everything* of himself to us. Love like that.”

Imitate **God**. And “forgive each other, just as God in Christ forgave you.” (v. 32) How *badly* does our world need to hear that!?

Mamie Mobley’s only child, Emmett, was visiting relatives in Mississippi in 1956. Outside a general store, with boys playing games, the 11-year-old decided to go in and buy some bubble gum and candy. As he came out of the store, someone asked Emmett, “How’d you like the lady in the store?” Young Emmett whistled his approval. Someone nearby heard, and didn’t like an African American whistling at a Caucasian woman. It was 2:30 a.m. the next Sunday when two men stormed into the house where Emmett was staying and took him at gunpoint. Three days later they discovered his badly beaten body.

Years after the tragedy Mamie was asked, “Don’t you harbor any bitterness toward the two men?”

Mamie replied, “What they did wasn’t for me to punish. It wasn’t for me to go around hugging hate to myself, because hate would destroy *me*. It wouldn’t hurt *them*.”

“I was brought up in [a] church [that] preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe the Lord meant what He said, and [I] try to live the way I’ve been taught. I haven’t spent one night hating those people.” (Studs Terkel, quoted in *Men of Integrity*)

She hasn’t spent one night hating the people who brutally murdered her only child, her 11-year-old son – because she was brought up in a church that preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ, she believes the Lord meant what He said, and she tries to live the way she’s been taught.

What would the world be like if all of us who call ourselves Christians did the same? If all of us believed the Lord meant what He said, and all of us tried to **live** the way we’ve been taught?

*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

AMEN