

Proper 14B 2018 Sermon

August 12, 2018

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.

You remember the joke: How many psychotherapists does it take to change a light bulb? One – but the bulb has to *want* to change.

St. Paul knew what it was to change: Once a legalistic Pharisee, a rabid *opponent* of Christianity, he had a powerful experience of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, which led him to become Christianity's greatest *proponent*. But it didn't happen overnight. Paul tells us that after his vision on the road to Damascus, he went away to Arabia for three years,¹ and only then returned to begin his missionary journeys. We don't know anything about those three years in Arabia. What we *do* know is that at the end of those three years, Paul's heart, mind, and perspective had totally changed.

How many Apostles does it take to change the religious landscape of the Roman Empire? One; but he has to have had his **own** life changed, so that he can encourage others to want *their* lives to be changed, also.

We Episcopalians joke about being God's "frozen chosen" who don't want any change; but I've heard Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Methodists characterize *themselves* in exactly the same way: God's frozen chosen, averse to any change. And yet, the Christian faith is all about being open to being changed more and more into the image and likeness of God. In fact, in today's Epistle reading, St. Paul commands us to "be imitators of God"! Now, I don't know about you, but I still have a ways to go – which means my life needs to be continually changed and transformed.

And that is what Paul is exhorting us to do in our Epistle reading today. He knows what we human beings are like, and he wants us to change our self-centered attitudes and behaviors. He lists several things he wants us to *stop* doing, and then lists some things he wants us to start – or continue – doing. I'd like us to take a brief look at that list. And I'd like us to take note of the *reasons* Paul gives for wanting us to change our behaviors: for in each case, the reason has to do not with our individual salvation, but rather with our relationships with one another, and the overall health and wellbeing of the community, the body of Christ.

"Putting away falsehood," Paul writes, "let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors..." Why?

Because, Paul says, “*we are members of one another.*” Some commentators note that the phrase “putting away” (which is repeated later in this passage) is a phrase Paul uses elsewhere in his letters to mean taking off the old self with its habits in order to be clothed with the new self, formed in the image of God.² Contemplative teachers talk about letting go of our False Self in order that our True Self might emerge. But whatever terminology we use, it is clear that Paul is telling us (and now I quote a more modern Bible translation): “Each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor because we are parts of each other in the same body.”³ Deceit does not build up the body of Christ. Nor does letting anger get the best of us, the subject of the next verse.

Paul’s command that thieves must give up stealing may not apply directly to you or me, but the *reason* he gives **is** instructive: We should labor and work honestly *in order that we might have something to share with the needy* (v. 28). We don’t do honest work simply to support ourselves and our families, but to have something to share with the needy!

Paul’s next instruction, that no evil talk come out of our mouths, is *more* than relevant to our own personal and corporate lives; for gossip is all too common, and even on the national stage, we hear more than a little “evil talk.” And again, the **reason** Paul forbids evil talk is because the only kind of talk that *should* issue from our mouths is talk which builds up and gives grace to others.

Next, Paul exhorts us not to “grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.” This calls to mind the words of our Baptismal liturgy, when the priest anoints the newly baptized with chrism in the sign of a cross on the forehead and says, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.” We bear the seal of the Holy Spirit and the mark of Christ, so when our words and behaviors do *harm* to others, we who bear the seal and the mark betray and grieve God.

Paul next gives us a long sentence which begins with a list of **proscribed** attitudes and behaviors and ends with a list of **prescribed** attitudes and behaviors. Paul writes: “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all [types of] malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” It is a litany of negative and positive attitudes and behaviors which could serve us well as a type of “examination of conscience.” In fact, rather than “Christmas in July” (that sales gimmick which retailers used last month to sell more stuff), perhaps we could use today’s reading from Ephesians as a kind of “Lent in August” – not the sackcloth and ashes and fasting part of Lent, but that part of Lent that calls us to examine our lives and change, repent, be transformed more and more into the image of Christ. For we *need* to look deep into our soul and ask, “Do I harbor within me any bitterness or wrath or anger or malice of any kind? If so, what do I do with that? Do I participate in wrangling or quarrelling or slander or any other type of hurtful speech? If so, what do I do with that?”

And with unflinching honesty, we need to look at our lives and ask, “Am I kind to others? Tenderhearted? Do I forgive others as God in Christ has forgiven me?”

One way we can change into a greater likeness of the image of God is to go through the positive and negative attitudes and behaviors Paul lists, one by one, and honestly examine our lives in light of them. If we discover we are lacking in one area, we can work on that. For instance, if we find we are not forgiving others as Christ has forgiven us, we can adopt some forgiveness practices to help us become more forgiving.

But there is another way we can change into a greater likeness of God; and that is to empty ourselves of our ego, our False Self, and allow God to fill our emptiness with the Holy Spirit, the indwelling presence of the Risen Christ, and *change us from within*. This is the purpose of contemplative prayer practices like Centering Prayer. “I have been crucified with Christ;” St. Paul writes to the Galatians, “and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” When we are transformed from within, we find that we don’t need to analyze our every attitude and behavior; for our attitudes and behaviors flow naturally from that interior space wherein the spirit of Christ dwells. This is what Jesus has been talking about in our Gospel readings the past few weeks when he tells us to take his very being into ourselves in the symbolic, sacramental form of bread and wine. In today’s Gospel, he puts it this way: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood [who take me into themselves] live in me, and I live in them.”

When I lived in Plainview, Texas, there was a woman in our parish who had a type of synesthesia, a condition which Wikipedia defines as “a perceptual phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway.” People with this condition are called “synesthetes.” When Bobbie Lee Farmer, my parishioner, *saw* or even *thought* of a number, she immediately saw a corresponding color. I remember calling her on the phone one day and hearing a recording that said “this number is no longer in service.” I found out later that she had changed her telephone number because it had too many brown colors (brown being a color that was somewhat depressing to her).

And my spiritual mentor says that when she is around holy people, she smells the fragrance of holiness about them.

St. Paul ends today’s Epistle reading with the familiar words which I use each Sunday before the Offertory: “...live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” A fragrant offering to God. My friends, I think there’s a good chance that God is a synesthete – that God experiences the attitudes and behaviors of individuals or groups of people as emitting either a pleasant fragrance or an unpleasant odor. And I imagine there are some other people in God’s diverse Creation who also have their olfactory sensors stimulated by the attitudes and behaviors of others. So let me end our brief “Lent in August” examination of conscience with the question: What fragrance (or odor) do my attitudes and behaviors emit? Do your attitudes and behaviors emit? And what fragrance would a spiritual synesthete experience wafting forth from Christ Church? What fragrance would we *like* ourselves and our church to emanate out into God’s world?

AMEN

¹ Galatians 1:17-18

² Colossians 3:9-10

³ Common English Bible (CEB)