

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Elizabeth H. Doolin
Sunday, July 4, 2020

Ephesians 4:25-32

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.

Today's scripture offers us quite the list of dos and don'ts from the apostle Paul. I imagine that we can all agree that everything on this list that Paul instructs the people of Ephesus to do, or refrain from doing, are solid rules for living a Christian life. We hear echoes of the ten commandments, along with the greatest commandment of Christ to love God and love neighbor, in this exhortation. But if these are rules for living a good and Godly life that have already been given, why is Paul repeating them? What's the point of reiterating what people have already heard from the Hebrew scriptures and from the teachings of Jesus?

The epistle of Ephesians doesn't give us much to go on in specific answers to these questions. Throughout this letter we don't learn much about the community of Ephesus like we do in other epistles.

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For these reasons, some scholars believe that this letter was intended more generally to distribute throughout early church communities, and not just for the church at Ephesus. Whether it was intended for one church or multiple, I do think there is something we can glean from this letter regarding Paul's concerns.

If we read earlier in chapter four, we get a glimpse into Paul's overarching goals, which are evident throughout other epistles as well: the formation of Christian community, and the new life experienced in Christ Jesus. Paul argues that these two ideas are intricately linked with another. In the first few verses of chapter four, Paul speaks to his desire for unity in Christ, writing that early Christians should, "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Just as we believe in God, Paul writes that we should also live as one people. He goes on to write of the transformation experienced as people reborn in Christ, and the ways this transformation shapes life in community. In verses 14-16, we hear the following: "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

And in our passage today, I think what we see is not simply a list of dos and don'ts for being a good person. They are not instructions on how to win a Christian merit badge, but a picture of what it means to live a life renewed in baptism in community with one another. I'm drawn in particular to two parts of this picture that Paul paints at the beginning and end of

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today's scripture: the instruction to "speak truth," and then today's fruit of the spirit, kindness, coming into play at the end of this passage with the instruction to "be kind." I'm not sure that we always think of these virtues, truth and kindness, as ones that naturally go together.

But, for Paul, and perhaps for us as well, these two ideas can go together. I think part of the "falsehood" that Paul encourages the early Christians to put away is not just intentional lying, but lies about who they are in Christ. Everything that Paul says to discard in this passage - acting out of anger, stealing, speaking with cruelty - this is not the truth of who we are as people made new in Christ. Kindness, instead, is the true expression of Christian identity, and is what allows us to form sacred community with one another.

New Testament scholar Jaime Clark-Soles speaks of the things we are to discard from the old life in this way: "wrath, bitterness, anger, clamor, slander, and malice. They act as a suit of armor protecting the real flesh-and-blood us. But church is not a gladiatorial event. In contrast, Kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness facilitate unity and cooperation, the way a flesh-and-blood body works or a healthy family. Armorless, we are more vulnerable, but we finally have a real shot at intimacy, at knowing and being known. There is no doubt that intimacy will involve hurt; hence, the necessity for forgiveness."

What I take from Dr. Clark-Soles's words are that the truth of our kindness in Christ is the truth of our vulnerability. When we act out of who we are at our core; as followers of Jesus, we can shed this armor that offers a false sense of security, and cuts us off from genuine connection with one another. But when we live into the truth of our kindness, we can allow others to see who we are in all of our faults and frailty; *and*, we can then see others through a lens of grace and empathy.

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I've been reading this book recently called *Spiritual Formation*, which is a compilation of writings by Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest and teacher known for his writings on spirituality and pastoral care. In one of the passages in this book, Nouwen recounts his experience transitioning from teaching at Harvard and Yale to serving in the L'arche Daybreak community in Richmond Hill, Ontario. L'arche is an organization that has centers across the world that offer residential communities and services for folks with developmental disabilities.

Nouwen writes that prior to entering L'arche, his notion of what community meant was very narrow. He had ideas about who was in, and who was out; who he could be in relationship with, and who he couldn't be. He assumed that community could only be found with people who thought, prayed, looked, and acted like he did. I don't think this is unique to Nouwen. I think this is something that many of us do, all the time, and it's a hard habit to break. But after he joined the L'arche community, Nouwen developed a friendship with a man there named Adam. Adam was a member of L'arche who had "severe physical and emotional challenges." But in opening his heart to Adam, Nouwen found that Adam "opened the door for him to the place where God dwells." Nouwen found that this relationship changed his whole concept of what community meant. He writes, "I found a new vision of community as a place of forgiveness and celebration, where we are more similar than different. I came to realize that the difference between people with disabilities and those with different abilities just wasn't there anymore; that I could love those with physical and intellectual challenges because I had my own set of disabilities. I could be close to people in pain because somehow they revealed my pain to me...rather than wandering off to the periphery of life, where I might discover some small difference, I am called to go to the center, where I realize my solidarity with all human beings."

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When I think about the kindness that Paul speaks of in Ephesians, I think another way that we can understand what he means is with this word that Nouwen uses: solidarity. Seeing ourselves as intricately and intimately connected to others, being able hear the truth of their pain, and share ours as well. It is living into the famous phrase that comes from South African Ubuntu philosophy - "I am because you are."

This is the kindness that is required for the building up of relationship with one another. Not just relationships that are civil, or present a pretty picture of harmony, but relationships that are genuine and truthful. This isn't about catching flies with honey rather than vinegar. It's not about how the words that come out of our mouths benefit us as individuals, but how they shape our life in community with one another.

The word translated as kind in today's text, the Greek *chrestos*, is also used by Paul in his letter to the Romans. In Romans chapter 2, Paul writes about judgement, and condemns the ways in which the members of the church in Rome have passed judgment on one another. He writes, "Do you not realize that God's kindness - *God's chrestos*, is meant to lead you to repentance?" In Ephesians, we see that kindness is linked with forgiveness, but I think that forgiveness and repentance are two sides of the same coin. In communal life, there will be times that we fail, and we hurt one another. But the capacity to confess our sins, and forgive one another, comes through the kindness and grace we are capable of in life in Christ. This is what true solidarity looks like as we walk alongside one another, growing in our relationships with Christ and each other.

This past week in the Young Adult Theology on Tap gathering, Nichole Cooley led our group in a discussion on the trauma inflicted by Native American boarding schools in the United

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States and Canada. This topic has been in the news after the discovery of mass unmarked graves of Indigenous children at the sites of former Indigenous schools in Canada, in which indigenous children were forced to leave their homes to attend boarding schools. Many were run by churches, with the explicit goal of assimilating children to Canadian culture and language. The United States has its own history of Native American boarding schools, engaging in the same practices of forcibly removing children to attend these schools well into the 1960s. The result of these practices in both countries is a legacy of abuse and trauma of Native peoples that is still felt today.

In our discussion, we wrestled with questions of how our faith calls us to address this trauma, and why we should be aware of these events that most of us - a group of white people in their 20s and 30s - might not know about were it not for recent news or a class in college. What many of us landed on in our discussion was that knowledge is the first step toward repentance, empathy, and relationship-building. As Christians, we believe in the power of confession, stating the truth of the harm done, and admitting the sins committed by people in power. And when we hear of the sorrow, and the hurt that others have endured - it is only in hearing these stories and opening our hearts to them that we can empathize with the pain of others. It is this combination of truth-telling and heart-felt listening that might allow for the possibility of building new relationships, and imagining a better way forward. As we celebrate the independence of our nation today, I think we must also tell the truth of our history, if we are to have any hope of building a country where everyone is truly free, and we might stand in solidarity with others, and build authentic relationships in community life.

It is indeed relationships that are at the heart of life in Christ.

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Samuel Wells, a priest and vicar in the church of England, describes God's incarnation in Jesus Christ in this way, "What we discovered from God being with us was that the most surprising thing about God was that God is relationship: there's nothing in God that's not relationship. Relationship isn't the way God does or communicates something more important; it is what God fundamentally is."

God is relationship. And God calls us to cultivate the kindness that has been planted inside each of us - growing in Christ's love, and growing as Christ's body.

May it be so. Amen.