

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, July 24, 2022

Ephesians 4: 25-32

So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, 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. Those who steal must give up stealing; rather, let them labor, doing good work 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 good 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. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Paul is writing to a community striving to be faithful in a new and difficult landscape. You could take a deep dive into Ephesians, see all sorts of things that the Church in Ephesus was dealing with. Turns out that the young Church deals with and dealt with many of the things that the Church a couple thousand years later must deal with. We are, of course, just a bunch of people. People can be really peopley sometimes and being in community can be more difficult at some times than it is in others. Paul knows something though. He knows something about what it means to be in community one with another. He knows that the way that we communicate with each other is of critical importance. So, Paul says to that early Church, the way that you interact with each other will matter. It will matter in the ways that you are able to manifest the kingdom of God in your midst. He begins with a call to “put away all falsehood.” He tells them being truthful with one another is going to be critical. It’s going to be crucial for you to be honest and authentic with each other. If we’re honest with each other this morning, then we know that that’s something that the church still wrestles with. Being truthful. Because we get up on a Sunday morning, and we get dressed, and some of us put on collars, and some of us put on real nice clothes, and we make ourselves look as pretty and as good as we possibly can, and we put our best face forward. On a Sunday morning, we cover up all the things that we carry with us to this place. That’s not bad, necessarily, but what it is an opportunity for us to be truthful with one another. When we gather on a Sunday morning, and someone asks you how you’re doing? This is a place where we ought to be able to speak truthfully about that one to another. This should be a place where we can have consolation in community.

He starts with that. “Put away all falsehood. Let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor for we are members one of another.” You think you’re alone in this journey of faith, Church in Ephesus, but you’re not alone. There are people seated right beside you in chairs, in pews. There are also people that you walked in with, that you’ll walk out with. You’re not alone in this. We belong to each other. And then he says this. “Be angry, but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Perhaps when you were a child, you heard this from a parent. Or perhaps

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as a parent you shared it with a child of yours. Perhaps it's been something that's guided you too. Paul says to the Church in Ephesus, anger is natural. We don't judge our feelings. We judge our reaction to and our behavior in response to our feelings. Anger is natural but shining light on anger and moving through it is going to be critical for you as a community. Something's going to rub you the wrong way. Something's not going to sit well with you. Someone's words are going to cross you, and yet the anger response is going to be a natural one for you. But you can't let the sun go down on that. Process it. It's going to be critical for you as a community. He gives a caution to those there with sticky fingers. Folks must have been stealing, picking up things and taking things that weren't theirs. We imagine those might be physical objects, but it might be something else as well. We're not going to dive too deep into that this morning because then he gets to a big one. Verse 29. "Let no evil talk come out of your mouth, but only what is useful for building up as there is need so that your words may give grace to those who hear."

"Only what is useful for building up."

This is an important phrase for the early Church. Paul says you're going to speak all sorts of different words, but I need you to do something. I need you to think about the ways in which your words are either building up or tearing down the community that you are a part of. The individuals seated right around you that you are struggling to be faithful with. When you speak, you can literally help build up the Body of Christ in your midst. Well, you can, literally Paul says, "give grace to one who hears." It's this unique thing. We often hear of God's grace being bestowed upon us in scripture. We're not so often given the opportunity to literally bestow grace upon another. Yet Paul seems to say that the words that we use if they, indeed build up our neighbors, we are giving grace to those who hear. Then verse 31, and this one might be convicting for some of you. It is for me. "Put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice." Boy, it must have been easy to write. It's a whole lot harder to practice, and the Church in Ephesus knew that too. I wonder if they stood up and said where do we put it this bitterness, this wrath, this anger, this wrangling, this slander, and all this malice. Give us a place, Paul, where we might put it away. Yet the challenge remains the same. He ends with this. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." He's got to bring it back to Christ, and he does. Your posture should be one of kindness, Church in Ephesus. You should come with a strong back, but as Brene Brown's "with a soft front."

Forgiving one another, just as you have been forgiven by God in Christ.

If we are to imagine together what it means to be the Body with the words that we speak, then we as the Church have to wrestle with these few verses here, these seven verses in Paul's letter to the Church in Ephesus. Because if we look around, we know how easy it is, particularly in these days and in these times, for words to tear down and to tear apart. What we've seen growing over many years for us is a way of interacting, a way of talking with each other that certainly hasn't put away malice and wrath and anger. It certainly hasn't become the prevailing conversation of our time, words that build each other up.

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What do we do with that? Is the church of Jesus Christ supposed to be some unique example for the world of what language looks like that builds up one another and binds us one to another? Is that what Paul is trying to say?

If we look around our world, even amongst many Christians, we see a vocabulary that would rather tear us apart than bind us together. Yet in Christ, Paul sees a figure that builds people up. With the words that Christ uses, and Paul calls the church to a different way of modeling the building up of the world than what we see out in the world. It's easy to talk about, but I'm a tactile person. Maybe you are. A few years ago, I was very nervous heading into Advent. Not because of the sermon series or church or anything like that. Church was great, ready to preach, all that sort of stuff. But I was really nervous because I knew that I was going to be spending a week with my family over Christmas. Those who giggled know why I was nervous, and those who didn't might be too embarrassed to. Spending a week with family can be a challenging thing. I had a friend who said you should come to this Advent preparation event. It was at this yoga studio in Athens, and we spent four hours together deep breathing and processing and trying to prepare our spirits to be around our family for extended periods of time. At the end, we were just getting done, and the instructor for this class pulled out this little metal thing that looks like. Well, actually I have one here. This isn't mine, okay? It's going to be gross if you think it's mine. This isn't mine. This is brand new. This is unused. Do y'all see this right here? Does anybody know what this is?

Who said that? Raise your hand. There you go. You're on it, bird. Okay. This is what the instructor pulls out. The instructor holds it up and says, "This is a tongue scraper." It would be a little gross if you thought this was used. This is a tongue scraper. This is dental hygiene practice for you for the next month. When you brush your teeth, I want you to use this, and I want you to clean your tongue as well. Perhaps some of y'all when you're brushing your teeth, you brush your tongue. Well, this is a device specifically for this purpose, and I want you to do this. I want you to cleanse yourself and cleanse your mouth. When you begin the day, I want you to start your day with a brand new mouth. Before you've spoken a word to anyone, I want you to have a clean slate. Then I want you to go through the day, and I want you to speak words that build up and encourage even in the midst of whatever you're having to navigate as a family. And at the end of the day, I imagine you will have spoken some words that you didn't really want to speak. They might have been words of anger or malice. They might have been some falsehoods that you spoke. I want you then to cleanse again every word that you've spoken. Brush your teeth. Scrape your tongue. Be done with it. Know that as you go to bed that night, those words are gone and washed in the sink, and that you can begin again tomorrow. I told you I am a tactile person. That was four years ago, and that's become a daily practice for me. Every morning before I speak a word, drink coffee, drink water, anything like that, brush my teeth, clean my mouth out and prepare for the day. When I get back to my place across town at the end of the day, I probably have spoken a ton of words. I am proud of a bunch of them, and I am probably not proud of a whole lot of others as well. But I go through the practice again, forgiving myself as I have been forgiven, realizing that every day we can start anew.

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It really helped me that holiday season to navigate what it looked like to be with family for a while. Even now, it gives me an intention daily for what it looks like to allow my speech to reflect the love and the grace of God. You all have known me for a year and a half, so you know that doesn't always happen. But I try and I think what Paul is trying to tell the Church in Ephesus is that we've been given this gift, this Savior, who speaks upon us with life and resurrecting power with grace.

We, as a Church, are to be a reflection of that in the world because, church and Ephesus, you go outside the doors and you're going to see all sorts of different examples. We are called to be the Church, not just here, but out in the world. We are, indeed, called to be the Body of Christ. So, our words must echo the words of Jesus in character and in love. Paul encourages the early Church to speak words that build up, both individually and communally, and I think we need to hear that challenge for us this day too because the truth is that words can knit us back together.

Our words can bandage wounds. They can inspire. They can move us to joy and laughter. They can bind us each to one another, and they can build up the Body. My hope for you this week, whether it is in friendship, in marriage, in parenting, in your work, is that you might be able to follow the encouragement of Paul to the early Church. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you. My hope is that your speech might reflect God's grace and god's love and God's hope, not just for you and your neighbor, but for all the world. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God Mother of Us All. Amen.