

TOUGH LOVE

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

A couple had two little boys, ages eight and ten, who were excessively mischievous. The two were always getting into trouble and their parents could be confident that if any mischief occurred in their town, their two young sons were involved in some capacity. The parents were at their wit's end as to what to do about their sons' behavior. The parents had heard that a clergyman in town had been successful in disciplining children in the past, so they contacted him, and he agreed to give it his best shot. He asked to see the boys individually, so the eight-year-old was sent to meet with him first. The clergyman sat the boy down and asked him sternly, "Where is God?" The boy made no response, so the clergyman repeated the question in an even sterner tone, "Where is God?" Again, the boy made no attempt to answer, so the clergyman raised his voice even more and shook his finger in the boy's face, "WHERE IS GOD?" At that, the boy bolted from the room, ran directly home, and slammed himself in his closet. His older brother followed him into the closet and said, "What happened?" The younger brother replied, "We are in BIG trouble this time. God is missing, and they think we did it!"

Well known literary figure Dr. Samuel Johnson, most famous for his Dictionary, was a devout Christian. Unlike his many friends who had the tendency to turn their conversations into displays of verbal brilliance or into gossip and slander, Johnson retained a deep sense that there was more to life than that. He was without malice. Johnson would entertain persons from all walks of life and all levels of education. He did not believe in discriminating against persons for any reason. On one occasion, his friend Boswell asked him what the point was of sharing a meal with people who had nothing to say that was worth remembering. Johnson replied that the point was 'to eat and drink together, and to promote kindness.'

Kindness is a virtue not often enough considered in our divisive world today, particularly on the pages of Facebook and in the current climate in our nation. Kindness, however, remains central to what Christianity is all about.

We see this stated clearly at the end of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, verse 32 "be kind and merciful, and forgive others, just as God forgave you because of Christ." Another way to consider this verse is this way: Be kind to one another, cherish tender feelings for each other, forgive one another, just as God forgave you in the king. (N.T. Wright). Being kind to one another is one of the purest forms of the imitation of God. How would you feel if God were the kind of god who was always making snide or bitter remarks at us? What would worship, and prayer be like if we thought God had been talking about us behind our backs, putting us down to one another? How would we feel if we thought we could not trust God to tell us the truth, if he was always losing his temper with us? Now apply these last questions to your own life and ask yourself, "how do people feel about us if that is what we are like?" Ouch!

The Apostle Paul is teaching the people of Ephesus what is expected of them as followers of Jesus Christ. Christianity was still in its beginning and if the people were all sour grapes, critical and negative, why would anyone want to be a Christian? It is the sad truth, however, that all too many Christians, and sometimes whole churches have allowed themselves to forget that kindness and mutual forgiveness are the very essence of Christian community. Seriously, if we are being called to unity, as this letter of Paul's stresses repeatedly, it is going to be far easier to obey the call if we are working hard at 'promoting kindness.' (N.T. Wright)

What is that phrase we all know so well, “You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar!” But putting it this way sounds manipulative, and dishonest. Some chafe at this instruction of Paul’s saying it squelches our real personality. My Mom’s family could cut a person to the quick in seconds, and then excuse what they have said by saying, ‘I am only being honest! Or, ‘that is just who I am!’ Paul says no! Verse 29: “Stop all your dirty talk. Say the right thing at the right time and help others by what you say.”

Speaking the first thought that comes to our minds without first applying the THINK acronym:

THINK T – is it True H – is it Helpful I – does it Inspire confidence N – is it Necessary K – is it Kind, is not the most loving way to approach another person. Some people think that by doing this they are being ‘free’ or ‘being themselves;’ but that is usually an excuse for selfish behavior, and lazy thinking. Anglican Priest, N.T. Wright says that “we should regard our moods and the speech that flows from them, as we might a strong willful horse, which needs to be reminded regularly of the direction we’re supposed to be following!

Along with kindness, Paul lets the people know that anger must be dealt with appropriately. He refers to Psalm 4:4 “Don’t sin by letting anger control you. Think about it overnight and remain silent.” You might be more familiar with the NRSV translation which states: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,”

Paul isn’t saying one should not get angry; anger itself is a natural human emotion, and to pretend it isn’t there is a form of lying. But, he insists, you should not let it lead you into sin. You must learn to tame it, and deal with it. And you must do this before going to sleep at night. Otherwise we are giving a toe-hold to Satan to enter into our lives. Paul isn’t suggesting that controlling anger means buttoning up our lip, locking it and throwing the key away. Paul indicates that our tongues are to be used to bring God’s grace to people by what we say and how we say it. In particular our speech should be sound like the very people marked by God’s Holy Spirit.

One Sunday on their way home from church, a little girl turned to her mother and said, “Mommy, the preacher’s sermon this morning confused me.” The mother said, “Oh? Why is that?” The little girl replied, “Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?” The mother replied, “Yes, that’s true, honey.” “And he also said that God lives in us. Is that true, Mommy?” Again, the mother replied, “Yes.” “Well,” said the little girl, “if God lives in us, and is bigger than us, wouldn’t God show through?” Out of the mouths of babes!

Back to Paul...this particular passage lists virtues and duties that mark the transformed and transforming community. How many of you here this morning, like and welcome change? I have my theories on why this is so, which is very tied up in the human condition - but that is a topic for another time. I am always a little amused though with the degree with which people resist change, because the Christian life is all about putting off the old self so God can give us the new. The majority of our life as believers is spent being made into the image and likeness of God. Soooo...how can we be transformed if we are so resistant to change??

When we come to Christ we are in essence reborn. Because we are reborn, the habits of our old self have no control over us. The Holy Spirit enables the baptized to put off the “evil powers of this world and put their whole trust in Jesus’ grace and love.” (The Book of Common Prayer) Consequently, the

characteristics Paul speaks of in this passage of Ephesians are not merit badges we set out to obtain; rather they are the marks of the new life given to us in baptism. “Stop being bitter and angry and mad at others. Don’t yell at one another or curse each other or ever be rude. Instead, be kind and merciful, and forgive others, just as God forgave you because of Christ.”

So What, Pastor Tizzy? What does this mean for us today?? First, we are a new creation. Paul is calling for the new Christians to remember who they are in Christ and to focus on the way to life in Christ Jesus, instead of turning back to the very things Paul mentions we are to put off: anger, gossip, trash talking...instead we are to put on kindness.

Secondly, we are part of the body of Christ and as part of the body we encourage one another and help one another to live out our baptismal promises. Christians everywhere still do not fully embrace what it means to have an incarnational faith. God lives in us, God is bigger than us, therefore God should show. Paul is calling for these early Christians and each one of us here not to merely worship God in Christ, but through the Holy Spirit to imitate Christ in our own behavior. We are to forgive as we have been forgiven, turn from wrath and anger to loving kindness; love as God in Christ loves us. The hope is that through the Holy Spirit, we will grow into the likeness of Christ and that God will use us as instruments to bring in God’s real of peace, justice and mercy. On earth as it is in heaven!

And finally, Paul urges us not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God: Don’t make God’s Spirit sad. The Spirit makes you sure that someday you will be free from your sins.

As United Methodist we are always “moving towards perfection. In a nutshell, this perfection happens when we are able to love everyone with God’s perfect love – that is unconditionally. Another way of looking at it, is we are to see others just as God in Christ sees them. We are to grow in this love. We do not wish to do anything to grieve God, because of our love for God in Christ. We both, as individuals and this community of faith, want to focus on serving Christ by pleasing him. Pleasing him like the Congregation in our closing story:

A pastor of a Presbyterian church tells this story. There was a young woman who came to a Presbyterian Church which happened to be a small country church. She came to present her child for baptism – a child born out of wedlock. Back then, in a small rural community, a woman like that can find herself shunned. The day of the baptism the woman stood alone before the congregation holding her child in her arms. The pastor did not realize ahead of time the awkwardness of the situation. He came to the part in the baptismal service when the questions are asked, “Who stands with this child to assure the commitments and promises made here will be carried out? Who will be there for this child in times of need and assure that this child is brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?” It was at that moment he realized there was no godmother or godfather on hand to answer the question. But without hesitation, as though on cue, the entire congregation stood and with one voice said, “We will!”

Friends this is the church at its best. This is the church who has fully embraced some of what may seem like tough love in the words of the Apostle Paul. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.