

Members Of One Another

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.

Members Of One Another

Ephesians 5:15-20

August 11, 2024

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

While I certainly was aware that it would be a rough reentry back to my life following two very wonderful weeks of vacation (thank you for your gracious forbearance) I admit I was quite ill-prepared and more than a little disheartened to find myself preaching on Paul, in general, and this passage, in specific, on the first Sunday of my return.

I mean, what a *mess*, huh?!? Just look at what is going on in this passage: falsehood, anger, bitterness, wrath, thievery, evil talk, more anger, wrangling, slander and, a perennial favorite, malice. Welcome to the church at Ephesus. Frankly, when I first read today's passage, I thought *here we go again*. The Apostle Paul on another one of his rants. Which *I* have to now preach on; and during the *summer* no less. Then, right there in the midst of feeling sorry for myself, I suddenly had a sudden pang of commiseration. *Nobody* addresses such matters in a church unless absolutely required to do so.

II.

Here in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul is writing while imprisoned in Rome in an attempt to create nothing less than a complete paradigm shift within the church at Ephesus. Not only in their world view but, more importantly, in their spiritual awareness.

In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, Ephesus was exceeded in population only by Rome and Alexandria. The capital city of the Roman province of Asia, and an important seaport, Ephesus had approximately a quarter of a million people, and, along with a significant Jewish community, Ephesus was home to many Greeks, Romans, and other settlers from throughout the entire Mediterranean resulting in a bustling, multi-ethnic center of trade, commerce and culture. So, it was in this light, and from this perspective, that the congregation in Ephesus saw themselves: as having all the best the world could offer.

III.

Unfortunately, along with the best also came all the worst the world has to offer. So, in this particular section of the letter, Paul is encouraging them to put away falsehood, bitterness, wrath, anger, stealing, wrangling and slander, etc. and, instead, adopt a more Christ-like way of treating each other; with kindness, truth, tenderheartedness, and, of course, the same kind of forgiveness that God, through Christ, has extended to them. Certainly, this kind of moral and ethical articulation of how they should live in the world and act toward each other was nothing new to them, then, and it is certainly nothing new to us, now. What *is* new, however, says Paul, is the *reason* we should live and act in such a way: because, through Christ, we are members of one another; and that, is the most fundamental paradigm shift of all.

IV.

For Paul, the arrival of the cross signals a cosmic shift in existence. No longer are we characterized by race, nationality, ethnicity or creed (to which I would add political affiliation) but all have been made one in Christ and one with God; belonging, now, both to God *and* to one another. And *this* is the reason, if not the motivation, that we should act with graciousness toward one another.

Seen in this light, the early church becomes the incubator for this admittedly fragile way of being in the world; both back in the day, and for all of us living through these days. The only difference being, in this day and age the church is something of a last bastion and a sanctuary for people both earnestly searching and desperately needing a place where they can belong, be accepted, and are supported in the daily struggle which is life in this our modern age.

V.

Which, we all can agree, is a most wonderful message for us to *hear* and a terribly important message for us to *deliver*; not only to those in the church, but to the larger world as well. Still, I confess that at the end of the day this passage makes me feel a little sad. Sad that such things arise in any church, and sad that so much time and energy needs to be devoted to addressing them.

One of the things I've had to acknowledge is that I have been *incredibly* fortunate (apparently atypically so) to have spent the past 31 years in parish ministry and rarely have I needed to venture into a conversation such as this. I am aware of far too many churches, and presbyteries, who spend years or even generations addressing such matters. What a waste of time and energy. What a loss of momentum and fulfillment. What an dearth of joy and celebration. What a forfeiture of opportunity along with too many squandered days which we will never get back. Necessary, perhaps, but sad nonetheless.

VI.

All too often the church's role in one's spiritual life is understood too simply as a check on bad behavior (that is to say, sin). With the thinking being where the mind and body lead the heart and spirit will follow. While I certainly agree it is import to have clear standards and expectations and hold ourselves accountable to them, when a church is living as it should the spiritual lives of its members is actually what serves as a check on the church. Are we, collectively, living and acting in ways which reflect not just on our standards of morality and neighborliness but, moreover, on our expectations for hope, grace, and joy? Do we have faith enough to believe that where the heart and spirit lead, the mind and body will surely follow?

VII.

In today's passage Paul is seemingly writing with a sense of urgency. If not a direct response to some immediate crisis in the congregation and/or society, at the very least Paul is hoping his words will avert such a crisis. Which got me to thinking, what is the message that *we* urgently need to hear today? While Paul is concerned with malice, the slow creep of malais should be much more worrisome to us. Instead of warning against slander, we should be girding ourselves against stagnation. Rather than worrying about wrangling, we should be endeavoring to keep our restlessness on a leash. In place of admonition about anger, our challenge is to fend off despair. Rather than guarding against evil talk, we should focus more on walking the walk. Less concerned with thievery, our task is to truly value the trove of treasure which is already ours. Instead of working against wrath, we should be embracing a wiliness about being in the world but not of it. Rather than resisting bitterness, we should be more deliberate in binding ourselves to the bounty of blessings God provides us. And, where Paul cautions against falsehood, we should focus on the power of the truth to bring clarity to our lives and world.

VIII.

All of *that* said, THE most pressing issue we face as the church and members of it is to be imitators of God. About this, the Apostle Paul was *spot on*. I mean, think about it, if *you* were God looking down on the world you had created, what would move you to endure the woes, atrocities, and misdeeds that the crown of your creation perpetuates upon itself? While the first easy answer we might give is love, I would assert to you today that it is the sheer enjoyment of the wonder of it all which I believe sustains God from day to day. A wonder which also has the power to sustain you and me as members of one another. We live our lives together as a community of faith not just to help shoulder each other's burdens, but to marvel at and bask in each other's joys. When we miss that, we run the risk of missing the entire point and purpose of our lives, as well as the cross of Christ.

IX.

I end today with brief story. This past week I paid a visit to Vern and Arvilla Aldous. They have been going through some very serious health challenges for the past couple of years and, in particular, the past few months. They recently received some wonderful news and I stopped over to celebrate with them. Vern and Arvilla is what we call in my trade an "easy visit." Conversation flows easily, laughter is shared, news of each other's lives, families, and our church exchanged. Strong coffee is enjoyed in rocking chairs on the front porch in summer.

In observation of this period of serenity, Vern and Arvilla snuck off last week to Higley in their camper trailer to enjoy some time alone together. A former RVer myself, and one who aspires to such a life in retirement, I asked a rather simple question of them inquiring as to what they do with their days while camping? However, before either could answer the conversation drifted elsewhere.

X.

A few days later, though, I received a text from Arvilla giving answer to my question about what they do while camping. She said, "I got to thinking it is what we *don't* do...baking, laundry, house work, outside up-keep, and on and on! That is what makes camping."

Given today's scripture reading and sermon, I could not help but draw an analogy from her response. It is what we *don't* do...falsehood, anger, evil, bitterness, wrath, and on and on! That is what makes church, as we share our lives as members of one another. Amen.