

August 12, 2018 • 12th Sunday in Kingdomtide

BIND OUR HEARTS IN LOVE – SUMMER SERMON SERIES

“How We Talk Matters”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



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.

Someone last week mentioned that Wednesday was National Cats Day. That got me curious about all these “national day” designations and I looked into it a bit. Apparently today, August 12, is both National Youth Day and National Food Day, which kinda go together in fun way. When you start looking into it there are LOTS of food days—National Watermelon Day, National Popcorn Day, Peanut Butter Day, Chocolate with Almonds Day, Ice Cream Day, French Fry Day....followed up by National Bike to Work Day when you ride off all those calories you took in on the various food days.

As a person who spends a lot of time with words, I checked out Days related to my craft. I found National Book Lovers Day, National Writers Day, National Screenwriters Day, AND National *Unpublished* Writers Day.

Maybe my favorite of those Days is National Wordsmith Day. Wordsmith—a person who works with words, a person skilled in using words. Like a goldsmith, or a blacksmith, a wordsmith works with the raw material, in this case, with words, to produce something useful and hopefully beautiful.

The writer of the Scripture passage Dan just read for us was clearly a skilled wordsmith. In fact, throughout all the writings attributed to the Apostle Paul, we see this quality of carefully choosing words, as if “wordsmithing” us into unity was the most important thing to do. We heard it in last week’s reading: “Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together.” (CEB)

Throughout these passages, we hear Paul urging and praying for the unity of the Christian communities he sought to lead and encourage. As one commentator has noted: “He exhorts, cajoles, and...paints with words a picture of what oneness and unity look like.” And along the way, gives us many pointers as to what is required of us, members of the one body, disciples of Christ Jesus.

Words matter, the writer to the Ephesians reminds, and words have consequences. “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths,” he wrote, “but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”

In this spirit, many preachers open each sermon saying these words from Psalm 19: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

The letter to the Ephesians is instructing all who would be disciples of Christ Jesus to be wordsmiths of our words, to examine how we talk *with* and *to* and *about* one another, that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts might be acceptable in the sight of God. It says: “let us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members one of another.” What words are acceptable in the sight of God?

Words matter. Words have consequences.

Let me add here a few observations about that church community in Ephesus, to whom this letter was apparently written. It might be tempting to look back and see them through rose-colored glasses, as if everything in the early church reflected the presence and pure love of Christ. Actually—far from it! This bunch in Ephesus was a mess. Angry, quarreling with one another, bitter. They were a motley crew made up of former Jews who saw Christ one way, Gentiles who understood him quite differently, and others who were just trying to figure it all out.

The writer of this letter to them had evidently observed it all. You hear in this passage descriptions of lying, anger that festers in the heart, stealing, evil talk, bitterness, wrath, wrangling, and slander—all of which grieve the heart of God. As has been noted, if you had had any dealings with this bunch you'd not be eager to join this First Church of Ephesus! No thank you.

The Scripture writer is trying, through his words, to impose some sanity, to ratchet down the angry talk, to cause them to be quiet long enough to reflect on their common humanity and the desires of God's heart for them. It's not unlike parents separating fighting siblings, imposing a time out, so that anger can be set aside.

For a century and a half or so, children far and wide have learned the taunt: "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." It's a way of sticking your tongue out at other kids who say mean things. It's a way of telling yourself it doesn't hurt, when of course it does. "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me."

There's truth in it, to be sure. Don't we all know that sometimes we just have to shrug off something mean or hurtful that someone has said about us? Maybe they were just upset, or spoke in anger. If we can let it go, we can move on.

But sometimes, words hurt very much. They damage relationships. They tear the social fabric that weaves a community together. As psychiatrist Dr. Antonio Wood has observed: "When you speak ill of someone, you alienate yourself from that person. The more negative your comments, the more distant you will feel from the object. Say bad things about many people and your words will separate you from them."

It's very healthy that, as a nation, we are currently experiencing an examination of words and their consequences in many aspects of our life together, because we're experiencing a period of escalating violence in word and deed in our communities and on the national stage. As a result, in workshops on bullying to reconsideration of political speech, particularly around race, we're asking ourselves if we haven't let things get out of hand, and if we've fostered or at least tolerated a climate of anger, hate and alienation. It's time to examine ourselves and make some changes. It's time to reconsider the direction we've headed into and ask ourselves if there aren't perhaps some healthier and holier ways of living together.

This weekend makes the one-year anniversary of the murderous "Unite the Right" Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, that brought out white supremacists into the streets of the city and the university, onto church grounds, claiming the life of 32-year-old Heather Heyer when a car intentionally plowed into a group of peaceful counter-protesters.

Much has been said of this event. And we are holding our breath this morning to see what might unfold today in Charlottesville and in our nation's capital.

In describing what they saw last year, several commentators, including Brian McLaren—we've read several of his books in our Book Studies—spoke to what for them was perhaps the saddest and most alarming aspect the rallies: the anger on the faces of the young children of the supremacists, their young spirits already warped into hatred and racism.

Some among us are old enough to recall the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical "South Pacific" and a song that caught the imagination of the country at the time:

"You've got to be taught to hate and fear
You've got to be taught from year to year
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made
And people whose skin is a different shade
You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught before it's too late

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Before you are six or seven or eight
To hate all the people your relatives hate
You've got to be carefully taught”

Who will our children become? What lies ahead for our communities, our nation?
What more might we be doing, even now, to witness to God’s new creation of love?

The Scriptures remind us that there is a whole new way of being in community. A new way of speaking to and with and about one another. A new way of living together. It starts with our wordsmithing, the words we choose and the words we use. And from there, the Scripture pushes deeper, going inside our words, behind our words, deep into the heart of our words, to get at what’s in our hearts.

“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God... 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. Be imitators of God as beloved children, and live in love...”

We are to be imitators of the great love of God in Christ Jesus—in our sanctuaries and church community, “on the stage of a global village, and on the front lines of all human relationships.”

“Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.”

AMEN

Notes:

Richard F. Ward in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol 3*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Bishop Gregory V. Palmer. “Church Dividing Issues.” *Circuit Rider*, August | September | October 2018.

This children's taunt was first listed in 'Folk Phrases of Four Counties' (1894) by G.F. Northall and is first attested in the United States in 'Miss Lindsey' (1936) by S.G. Gibbons

“South Pacific.” Music by [Richard Rodgers](#); Lyrics by [Oscar Hammerstein II](#); Book by [Oscar Hammerstein II](#) and [Joshua Logan](#); Based on "Tales of the South Pacific" by [James A. Michener](#)