

Imitating God
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
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When I began my position as Intern and Interim Music Director here at Redwoods two years ago, I had not yet directed a hand bell choir. I had some limited experience assistant directing a youth orchestra at a local school here in Marin some years ago. After the first bell choir rehearsal, which I thought went extremely well, one of the members of bell choir asked to speak with me. We met just the two of us, and it was suggested that I had a rather unorthodox way of conducting. “We’re used to the conductor starting with the one on the down-beat,” I was told gently. The member then gave me some handouts for proper conducting methods, referred me to a website for more information, and gave me a smile of encouragement.

I am still deeply humbled by this interaction. I was so grateful for how it was handled – in the most efficient and least shameful way. The person addressed the situation that needed correction and took extra steps to be gracious and helpful. This is what Ephesians means to “speak the truth in love,” as we heard in the passage last week and again this week in the opening lines of our reading: “Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” There were a lot of other ways this situation could have been handled. The person took a risk. If I hadn’t been confronted because of fear, or to avoid potential hurt, or to not appear impolite, or to avoid the investment of time it took, the situation would have worsened as frustration increased for all of the bell choir members with my unorthodox ways. The correction could have been announced in the group setting, with the potential of putting me on the defensive, increasing embarrassment and shame. Instead, with patience and thoughtfulness, the person put away falsehood and spoke the truth in a way it could be best accepted and heard.

The passage from Ephesians read today gives behavior guidelines, and practical advice for the early churches that are still relevant today. The goal is unity for the church, the diverse community of believers that is Christ’s body living then and today in the world. It is a community built on love. The things mentioned in the reading today may seem like common sense, things we may hear or read and say, “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” we know all that. But the suggestions are much easier said than done.

Put away falsehood and speak the truth. Next, it says be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. What is noted here is that anger will surely arise; anger in itself is not a sin; sin can be defined as “missing the mark” or turning away from God. Anger itself doesn’t turn us from God. It is the choice of response to the anger that has the potential to turn us away from God. And once we have turned ourselves away from God, that is ripe time for the devil to jump in. I don’t know what you think about the devil. To me, it

is a convenient word for the force that attracts us to things that are not in our best interest, things not of God. The passage exhorts us to not let the sun go down on our anger, to not stay angry for long, to not go to bed angry because forces may come into play that harm rather than help us and our relationships. And remember, that's the goal: unity, not separation. Unity with God, unity with one another, unity within ourselves.

Research professor, Brene Brown, in her book, *Daring Greatly*, tells of an experience during a time she was trying to set boundaries at work to make more time for her family and personal life. She received an email from someone who was extremely angry that she was unable to speak at an event he was hosting. The email was mean-spirited and contained personal attacks. Rather than responding directly, Brown forwarded the email to her husband with a note telling him exactly what she thought about this mean guy and his email. She, too, used some personal attacks and insulting names. Then, she hit "reply" instead of "forward," and as she heard the swooshing sound the computer makes when sending an email, she realized what she had done. She had sent the email to the angry man instead of her husband. She was immobilized as the email came back, the man saying, "Aha! See, I knew it! You *are* a horrible person! You are not at all what you claim to be!" At this point, Brown paused, reverted to her training and research on shame resilience, and did three things – 1) practiced courage and reached out: she called her husband and a good friend who gave her empathy, support, and love. 2) talked to herself the way she would talk with someone she really loved who needed comfort: she said to herself, kindly, "You're ok. We all make mistakes." and 3) owned her story: she took responsibility and responded to the email from a place of authenticity and self-worth. She owned her part in the angry exchange and apologized to the man for inappropriate language. She set clear boundaries about future communications.

Though Ephesians doesn't explicitly mention shame, I see it as the under-laying thread through all the behaviors we are meant to avoid in the passage. The next one is thievery. I heard about a 12-step recovery group that had a theft issue. This spiritual group takes a voluntary collection by passing a basket, which covers rent for the room, snacks and refreshments, and contributions to local service centers. Someone in the group discovered that the clean-up person was stealing money from the collection basket. When the thief was confronted, she experienced so much shame that she stopped attending the recovery meetings altogether. She cut herself off, distancing herself from community rather than owning up and taking responsibility for what she had done.

The passage tells us that the reason Christians should stop stealing is because it does not allow for contributions to the needy. The verse implies that the reason to have a job is primarily to help those in need. It is not about the amount of the paycheck, the social status, or comfort level, but about being able to serve others in need. When we engage in behaviors such as lying or not telling the truth, angry outbursts, or stealing, the result is often shame and disconnection. Remember, the goal is unity.

So it is with unwholesome talk, the next behavior the passage tells us to avoid. “Let the talk that comes from our mouths be useful for building up and giving grace to those who hear.” So it was with the bell choir member, who offered me grace rather than shame in addressing my directing skills. Unwholesome talk, on the other hand, is poisonous and separates us from one another. Our speech can build up or destroy community.

Unwholesome “talk” can also apply to the written word today. Like Brene Brown, I, too, had an email experience that went awry. I was working for the first time as the music director at a retreat center, and planning emails were flying around. I emailed the planning group and asked if they wanted me to choose the hymns for the worship service. When I received a reply that was sent to the entire group, there was an older private email included, which one member had said, “Why is she so ignorant? Doesn’t she know the preacher picks the hymns? How could she be so foolish?” The person who wrote this had obviously not intended for me to see it. It was sent to the entire group, possibly, by mistake. The author of the email, obviously ashamed and embarrassed, soon announced his resignation from the committee, citing other more pressing responsibilities. Disconnection. When we make character defamations about others, it has the potential not only to harm the target, not only to harm the community, but most certainly, harms the one making the remarks. Because it is not from God, because it turns us away from God, we are then disconnected from the other. And, remember, the goal is unity.

We were marked with a seal at our baptisms, given initiation into the community of God, and so it grieves the Holy Spirit when we take actions that distance us from others, from our community. The Ephesians passage tells us to put away all of these hostile behaviors, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us. Again, it sounds like common sense. Why do we need to be told this? Isn’t it just obvious? Kind of cliché? Be kind and forgive?

The truth is that we put limits on kindness and forgiveness. “I’ll forgive her when...,” “I should forgive them but...” “I might forgive him if...”

Corrie ten Boom and her sister, Betsie, were sent to a Nazi prison camp in 1943. Their crime was harboring Jews in their Dutch home. At the Ravensbruck prison camp, Corrie’s sister died. A few years after the war, at an event where Corrie was speaking, Corrie came face to face with one of the guards from that camp. The man approached Corrie after her message and told her how grateful he was for her words. “To think that, as you say, God has washed my sins away,” he said. The man’s hand was extended, but Corrie struggled to move her hand from her side. Her silent prayer mingled with the feelings of revenge in her heart: “Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.” Corrie’s testimony is that, when she took her former jailer’s hand, love for the man sprang into her heart. The healing of the world, she has said, hinges not on our forgiveness, but on God’s. Corrie wrote that in

her post-war experience with other victims of Nazi brutality, that those who were able to forgive were best able to rebuild their lives.

Therefore, be imitators of God, the Ephesians passage says. There is a saying, “Fake it till you make it.” This is essentially what happened with Corrie ten Boom. She couldn’t forgive on her own volition. She prayed and asked for help to act like Jesus. And then God raised her arm from her side. And there was healing. This is God’s grace. It is not earned or deserved. It is when we forgive that we are set free. Being forgiving keeps us in relationship, and God wants us in relationship. Remember, the goal is unity. Forgiving, however, does not mean that harmful behavior is acceptable or excused or that there are no consequences to destructive actions, as we discussed two weeks ago regarding the families of those killed in the Charleston Bible study and last week with the church-going mothers of the murdered sons. We can forgive, and still be called to action. Forgiveness opens the door; it is the step that unites us in conversation and gives hope for reconciliation. Forgiveness replaces shame with grace.

This is what happened at the cross, when at the peak moment of the ultimate shame, hanging there, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He, too, was asking for God’s help with this. And like Corrie ten Boom, whose hand was raised by God to hold that of her jailer, so Jesus was raised from his shameful death to a triumphant victory. Jesus was reconciled to God and created reconciliation for all humanity.

Imitating God doesn’t mean we always know what to do or how to do it. It means, as God’s beloved children, we stop and with an open and faithful heart, ask God for help. And then we trust that we will be granted through the Holy Spirit the grace to know how to proceed in love. This is what Jesus did, when he gave himself up for us.