

Being the Body of Christ

Third in a Four Part Series on Ephesians: Instructions for a Christian Community

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Selected verses from Ephesians 4 - 5:2

I plead with you, then, in the name of our Redeemer, to lead a life worthy of your calling. Treat one another with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the peace which binds you together. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called into one hope when you were called. ⁵There is one Savior, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Creator of all, who is over all, who works through all and is within all.

⁷Each of us has received God's grace according to the measure in which Christ has bestowed it.... ¹¹To some, the gifts that were given is that they should be apostles, to some prophets, to some evangelists, to some pastors and teachers. ¹²These gifts were given to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us attain unity in our faith and of the knowledge of Jesus Christ, until we become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ....

¹⁷So I declare and testify together with Christ that you must stop living the kind of life the world lives... ²⁵Therefore, let us have no more lies. Speak truthfully to each other, for we are all members of one body.

²⁶When you get angry, don't let it become a sin; do not let the sun set on your anger, ²⁷or you will make room for the devil.

²⁸You who have been stealing, stop stealing. Go to work. Do something useful with your hands, so you can have something to share with the needy.

²⁹Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up others, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

³¹Get rid of all bitterness, all rage and anger, all harsh words, slander, together with all malice. ³²In place of these, be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

⁵Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

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Rev. John Hudson, senior pastor at the West Concord Union Church, must have read this morning's lesson from Ephesians when he penned last week's piece for the *Boston Globe*. Here's what he wrote:

Making the first public remarks in more than 1,000 years, God appeared in the heavens yesterday and ordered all the world religions founded in His/Her name to "immediately take a well-deserved and long overdue time-out." At the crowded press conference, hastily called by the angel Gabriel with a trumpet blast, God's tone switched between anger and sadness as He/She described being frustrated with the boundless cruelty and violence committed in His/Her name.

"It's not like I haven't been patient," said God, who is also known as Lord, Yahweh, Allah, Creator and the Unnamed One. "I make and give to humans this beautiful gift called Creation. I give them the ability to think and love and imagine. I send them messengers who teach. I provide food for all, sunsets, cute babies, music, even the Internet! But the minute I turn my back, they all start fighting. Holy War this, Crusade that, and Jihad, blah, blah, blah," He/She said.

Citing the recent war in Lebanon as the final straw, God declared that, until further notice, each of the world's major religions would be punished. God then sent the religious leaders, with their faiths, to their rooms so that they could "sit and think about all the ways they've been bad. They can take their sacred books with them to read," continued God, "but that's it. No TV, no cellphone, and no iPod."

God was quick to assure the world that the good works of religion, including peacemaking, disaster relief, healthcare, education, and aiding the poor and downtrodden, would not be affected by the time-out order. "It's not that everything they do on my behalf is bad," noted God. "They do a lot of good. But just when you think humanity gets it and has learned how to live with one another, they start bombing each other. They stamp their feet and say, 'My faith is better than your faith, my country matters more than your country.' They act like each owns me and knows my mind. But not anymore. I'm back in town and taking charge!"

Responding to questions, God offered various opinions about life on earth, including reality TV ("No comment: Ask the Devil"), global warming ("I didn't turn up the thermostat"), and the recent Boston Red Sox-New York Yankees series ("I had to turn it off. It was too painful to watch").

Asked what religious leaders and their faiths might be allowed to sit down to the dinner table, God responded, "When they learn how to share and get along." Leaving the press conference through a hole in the clouds, God failed to respond to questions about when He/She might return. The clerics, struck speechless, went to their rooms.

Around the world, wars raged, poverty plummeted, and millions of people used the time they had scheduled for criticizing others – in God’s name – instead to clean up the earth, get involved in their communities, and wipe out disease.

And, truly, it was good.

Things weren’t so different 2,000 years ago when the author of Ephesians penned this letter. There was a bitter struggle going on between the Jews and the Gentile converts to Christianity. Each thought that their way was the only way. Their differences went far deeper than dietary laws and their practices of circumcision or non circumcision: their differences were rooted in basic truths and cultural practices that kept them at odds with one another just as Rev. Hudson has characterized the world religions of today. Yes, it must have been a stretch for them to be told to “get rid of all bitterness, all rage and anger, all harsh words, slander and malice and in place of these, be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

Unfortunately, in today’s world it isn’t only different world religions that are wrangling with one another. Denominations squabble with amongst themselves about polity and theology and creedal truths. And within denominations members fight bitterly with one another about social issues and tenets of the faith. It has become a farce to say that we are “United” Methodists when schism is only a vote at General Conference away. Surely these verses from Ephesians are as relevant today - locally, nationally and globally - as they were in the first century!

The heart of the message lies in vs. 17 of chapter 4 where the author of this letter exhorts the reader “to stop living the kind of life the world lives.” Truly this is easier said than done. But the point is that the church – the body of Christ – is called to be a distinctive people in its life together, thereby challenging the ways of the world. “Be imitators of God. Live in love as Christ has loved you” is what is encouraged in the opening verses of Chapter 5.

Wow! now there’s a tall order. Imitate God. And the result? The result will be a Christian community that is united as one body with one Spirit following one Savior and believing in a God and Creator who works through all and is within all. Such unity doesn’t mean that we all have to believe the very same way, but it does mean that we respect and tolerate and even celebrate our diversity within the one body.

Such unity doesn’t just happen. It’s hard work. It requires the development of habits that mirror God’s intentions for life together on this earth. The author of Ephesians lists some of these standards that delineate the shape of our response to God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. Don’t lie. Don’t let your anger become a sin. Stop stealing. Don’t badmouth one another. Get rid of bitterness. Forgive. Be kind. Love one another.

The list is reminiscent of the 10 Commandments, isn’t it? It was the 10 Commandments that shaped Israel’s response to God’s deliverance during the Exodus. The commandments were meant for the whole community, not merely for the individual.

And they were intended to build up this new community of refugees that were foraging their way from Egypt to the Promised Land by the sheer guidance of a companion God who led them en route for 40 long years.

Now these very commandments are being reframed for the community of the Messiah and fledging Christians are being asked to practice them until they can live together in unity and love. “Going on to perfection” was the way that John Wesley, founder of the Methodist tradition, loved to speak about the disciplined life.

It’s something like the fitness advocate who hits the gym or exercise room each day. She climbs onto the treadmill or he pushes those weights all the while wondering “What on earth is this getting me?” The hope is that the pace and the exercise will lead to some greater endurance, a stronger heart, a healthier body. So it goes. Follow through leads to life! Even the griping and moaning that goes with the sweat is in some way therapeutic. Perhaps there is less griping and moaning left to vent on something or someone else. But to maintain a level of fitness, routine workouts are required.

So it is with our spiritual habits. They require constant attention. They demand prayer and practice. Don’t lie. Tell one another the truth. Lying only leads to distrust.

And beware of anger. Don’t let it lead to sin. Oh, it’s human to be angry. Sometimes anger is even justified. The emotion is not sinful in and of itself but it can lead to sin, even to disaster. The question is not whether or not we will get angry with one another; the question is how will we respond to our anger. Anger becomes sinful when we allow it to overwhelm us or when we deny its existence. “The appropriate response is to take responsibility for our anger and to find ways to say how we feel and what we want from our neighbors without expecting them to change on the spot because we said so.” Good anger is anger that is intended to heal and not to harm, to unite and not to divide. (Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 11, *Lectioary Homiletics*, XII, 9)

A few weeks ago I introduced to you a book titled *Ashes Transformed* by Tilda Norberg. It is a book of post 9/11 stories that tell incredible stories of faithful responses to the horror of that day. One such story titled “Rage in Church” illustrates this morning’s advice about anger. It is the story of a United Methodist church in Ohio that opened its sanctuary for prayer and sharing on September 11th. The pastor invited members of the congregation to bring to God whatever they were feeling, assuring them that God would meet them in their depths.

One young man, a member of the church, took her words to heart. Bursting with fury, he began to rage at the attackers. He yelled. He ranted. He spewed hatred for terrorists. He insisted that the United States should immediately bomb Afghanistan.

The young man’s anger blew itself out finally and he sat down spent and sweaty. Wisely, the pastor did not lecture him about love and forgiveness. Instead, she said how glad she was that he felt free enough in God’s house to express exactly

what was inside him. The congregation, unaccustomed to such raw emotion in church, was a little frightened by it. But her permission-giving words enabled members to receive his volatile statements without overt judgment. In fact, this congregation, which had always found it difficult to share personally when asked for prayer concerns, suddenly found itself praying together.

After the service the young man hung around to speak to his pastor. Although a little embarrassed by his emotional display, he wanted to tell her that his anger was gone. No longer did he obsess about vengeance or feel hatred. Instead, he had discovered that allowing himself to erupt so deeply paved the way for a major healing. The church's acceptance of him even after witnessing his poisonous rage moved him, and the new peace and sense of freedom utterly surprised him. (pp. 151 – 152)

In that moment in that Christian community anger was redemptive. Because that young man did not let the sun set on his anger it became a necessary catharsis for his healing and for the unity of the congregation.

The next directive is an interesting one, not because it exhorts people against stealing but because it goes on to admonish former thieves to work honestly for their wages so that they have something to share with the needy! It is not sufficient, so far as the Bible is concerned, that one simply be honest; one is also to share with the poor. There is an economic dimension to being a Christian community. Human labor is placed in the service not of private gain, but of communal need! How counter cultural can the gospel be?! The admonition “to stop living the kind of life the world lives” takes on real meaning.

Again there is a meaningful story called “Meeting God Face to Face” in Norberg's book. This time the setting is the Evergreen UMC in Fort Bragg, California, where special needs children are served in the church's after-school program. On this particular afternoon, a few weeks before the 9/11 disaster, a visitor traveling on a bicycle interrupted their routine.

The man was trying to get home to San Francisco, but bad luck had plagued him, and he was running out of money. On impulse he had stopped by the church, wondering if the church might have a food pantry. The church happened to have a good deal of food left over from a funeral luncheon earlier that day. Raiding the refrigerator, the children set out a meal for the hungry man and sacked up more leftovers for him to take on the road. The kids also pooled their resources and give him a little money. Then they did what was utterly natural in their church: they surrounded the man and prayed for his safe journey.

A week after the September 11 disaster, the man called to say that he had made it home. Profoundly shaken by the terrible events, he felt moved to call and say thanks. The tragedy had prompted him to think seriously about his life, and the Fort Bragg kids had come forcefully to mind. As a result, he had resolved to help

other strangers as he had been helped by the children. “Tell the children I met God face-to-face at your church,” he told the pastor. “I just want them to know how much it meant to me.”

But not only was the stranger on his bike changed by this grace-filled encounter. The kids in the program, well acquainted with both rejection and kindness from others, had seldom experienced the joy of helping someone truly in need. Exhilarated and empowered, they now enthusiastically collect money in a little jar because they want to be ready in case another tired and hungry stranger comes to the church door.

When we share with those in need, human labor is placed in the service, not of private gain, but of communal need.

Yes, here in Ephesians is a marvelous set of practices for living together as a faithful community. Truth telling is an essential practice for a healthy community as is the appropriate expression of anger. Putting the needs of others above your own surely imitates God’s ways. Gossip and evil talk must be avoided because they do not build up, but rather divide the community. Kindness. Tolerance. Forgiveness. Love. These are the rigorous demands that will insure that there is unity in the body of Christ.

We will be tested in the coming year as we work together on a Vision for Holy Trinity and develop a strategic plan for the next 5 years. We know that there will not only be differences of opinion, but different ways of expressing those opinions. Can we grow in our own practice of tolerance and respect of our own diversity of personalities and concerns and passions? Will we meet the challenge of this morning’s lesson and “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the peace which binds us together? Kindness. Tolerance. Forgiveness. Love. They will be important watchwords and disciplines for us to embrace.

Eugene Peterson always says it the way it is. In his words the author of Ephesians says:

Get out there and walk – better yet, run! – on the road God called you to travel. Don’t sit around on your hands. Pour yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing difference and quick at mending fences. You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction. So stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness.

Let us commit ourselves to being imitators of God, living in love with one another that we indeed might model for the world what it means to live together in unity and peace, serving Christ in all that we do.

So be it. Amen and Amen.