

August 11, 2024

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Sermon Title: Walk In Love

²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸ Those who steal must give up stealing; rather, let them labor, doing good work with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is good for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. 5 ¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

It was the summer after my sophomore year in high school. I was finally old enough to work as a kitchen helper at the Bible Camp that was so special to me. I'm not sure why my parents didn't ask more questions when they dropped me off for ten weeks. They didn't ask about rules or supervision. They just drove away.

It was my first experience of living in community. There were five of us, fourteen and fifteen year-olds, all friends from camp, living in a single room with three sets of bunk beds and one bathroom. The counselors were forever responsible for campers, but we were only responsible to show up for our jobs. The rest of the time, we were completely unsupervised. The cabin was always a disaster, feelings got hurt, mean things were said, adventures were had, memories were made, friendships were forged. The fact that we were at a Christian camp was not lost on us and questions of faith and ethics were also part of the stew of our little teenage community.

Lost shoes were always a problem. We were forever looking for our other shoe. One of us came up with the brilliant idea of tying our shoes together and putting them in a pile on the closet floor. We all agreed on the plan and tossed our shoes in the closet. At the time, we weren't thinking, "what if a tornado blows through camp in the middle of the

night.” Sure enough, a few days into our organizational strategy, the chapel bell started ringing in the middle of the night. It was the only warning system there was for alerting the 150 campers and staff to take cover. The power went out and we couldn’t find a flashlight to save our lives, and all our shoes were tied together in knots. Had we not been terrified, the scene would have been worthy of a three Stooges skit, as we climbed all over each other trying to disentangle our tied-up shoes from the floor of a tiny closet. The tornado missed the camp by a couple of miles before we ever got out the door.

We called our little tribe the Schmeds, why, I don’t remember. We knew we had to make our living arrangements work because of the freedom and privileges we enjoyed. We didn’t want to ruin a good thing. It was a great experience, one I repeated for four more summers (except for the tying up our shoes part).

We learned to navigate each other’s personalities and dodge each other’s quirks. We knew we had to resolve conflict quickly or living together would be intolerable. We came to appreciate each other’s back stories and families as we talked into the night. Knowing each other made us a little more gracious with one another. And though we didn’t always participate in the camp activities, we went to enough campfires and chapel services to learn scripture and grow our faith.

It was messy and beautiful and wonderful preparation for college and life. I am forever grateful my parents didn’t ask more questions.

Those summers at camp were also wonderful preparation for ministry. I was reminded the other day of how messy church can get when my friend and colleague shared a letter she received from a member of her congregation. Serving as a short-term interim she was tasked with having to mediate a delicate personnel issue. The author of the letter called her every name in the book, including Satan, and cc’d a host of others, vowing never to return to that church again.

It was heartbreaking to read. So much anger. So defensive. So vicious. So unnecessary. Leaving no room for reconciliation or healing, it made my friend’s decision to retire from ministry much easier.

Church can be messy. Anytime you bring imperfect people together in community there is potential for issues and conflicts. The Apostle Paul understood this as well as anyone. When churches had issues, he wrote letters to guide them in how to be community. It doesn’t come naturally for everyone. Not everyone has the experience of being raised in a situation where they see good communication and conflict resolution modeled. Not everyone is schooled in the teachings of Jesus and the virtues the church

is called to embody. Not everyone has good self-awareness and emotional intelligence. And not everyone participates in church for the same reasons. That said, how do you get everyone on the same page? How do you create a culture of grace and love that welcomes all people wherever they are on life's journey?

Our reading today from the Book of Ephesians in the New Testament was likely not written by Paul, but it shares Paul's passion for the unity of the church. That unity is important because we are called to live together in such a way that everyone will recognize us as people who make God's love visible to the world.¹ Our passage for today talks about those behaviors and vices that are relationship breaking. And it also lists virtues and attitudes that are relationship making.

The letter to the Ephesians was written to a community that was a mix of Jewish and Gentile converts. These are people who didn't have a New Testament with four gospels to guide them. As converts, there was something about the gospel and Jesus that compelled them to be baptized and join the community, but they had yet to live into the fullness of what that meant. So, as you can imagine, it was messy. Do the Gentile converts have to follow all the Jewish laws? If not, what laws do they follow? What did they have as a guide for their life together?

They knew this much, the church is called to be an embodiment of the gospel, a living expression of the kingdom of God that Jesus taught and proclaimed. That doesn't happen overnight. We learn forgiveness. We learn to address our anger. We learn to serve. We learn to give. We learn to be attentive to the needs and suffering of others. We learn to share. We learn to sacrifice. We learn the ways of nonviolence. We learn justice and mercy. We learn to say, "I have enough." All of these take a lifetime to learn and practice. It takes commitment and effort. And to do this in community takes a whole lot of tenderness and grace. It takes a culture of love.

The rules we live by are not enforced by punishments and fines, they are instead invitational and aspirational and grounded in covenant. Jesus once told his followers that they will be recognizable as followers of Jesus by their love. That hasn't changed. The church is to be a loving body – loving those within the community – and extending that love beyond the community.

Our Disciples of Christ history highlights a slogan that was central to the foundation of the movement. It said, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials, diversity. In all things, charity." In all things, love. Even as you try to figure out what the essentials are, in all

¹ Henri Nouwen, Here and Now, p. 178

things, love. It sounds simple enough, but when our need to be right exceeds our capacity for love...things can get messy.

All kinds of vitriol hit the airways following the opening ceremony of the Paris Olympics when a number of high-profile individuals mistakenly thought Leonardo Davinci's painting of the Last Supper was being re-enacted by drag queens. Elon Musk posted that the tableau was "extremely disrespectful to Christians." It was called a mockery and insulting to Christian people around the world.

The Olympic Committee clarified that the tableau was inspired not by Davinci, but by a 17th century painting by a Dutch artist called "The Feast of the Gods." The memes and posts of Christians who were outraged and offended by Jesus associating with drag queens was ugly and hateful.

Before I fully understood what was being depicted in the opening ceremonies, I thought why not drag queens at the last supper. Jesus offended lots of people by the people he chose to eat with. A few days later, the Christian Century published an article saying, "Those who are offended by the Opening Ceremonies should take another look at their New Testaments."² Jesus ate with prostitutes and pharisees, tax collectors and outcasts, the misunderstood and the maligned. Why not drag queens? And Jesus would never endorse the taking up of arms to protect his honor as some hateful commenters inferred. When soldiers came to arrest Jesus and his disciple, Peter drew his sword, Jesus told him to put it away. Jesus didn't ride into Jerusalem on a war horse – he sat on a donkey.

A little piece of performance art on the global stage thrust Jesus and the point of Christianity into the spotlight. Who would Jesus invite to his table? Who did he invite to his table? What does it mean to follow and imitate this one who offended many because he loves and welcomes all? How do we as church, embody this love? So many questions...

In our small group book study, there was a quote in this week's chapter that I found very helpful for creating a loving mindset. It said, "People are mysteries to be encountered, not problems to be fixed."³ That quote reminds me that if we want to walk in love and create a culture of love, our first response to people who irritate us, or shock us, or offend us, or challenge us, our first response can be curiosity rather than judgement.

² Brandon Ambrosino, The Christian Century, July 29,2024

³ Jeffrey Munroe, Telling Stories in the Dark, p. 138.

If we respond with the same snarkiness and judgement what good does that do? Walk in love, says Ephesians. Show the world something better. We can make room in our hearts for transformation and relationship **making** rather than blasting people with our outrage and relationship **breaking** impulses.

Our reading from Ephesians is a call to live in community. It is a call to build one another up. It is a call to be gracious and kind, even as we navigate our differences. Sure, it can be messy, but it can also be amazing.

When half the church shows up to celebrate Ethan Chap's Eagle Scout award, I'd say it is amazing. It says something about who we are and our investment in one another.

Several years ago, Phillip Gully wrote a book called, "If the Church Were Christian." It's a provocative title to be sure. Diana Butler Bass wrote an excellent 10-point summary of his book that describes well the church that the author of Ephesians envisioned. In a Christian community:

1. Jesus is a model for living more than an object of worship.
2. Affirming people's potential is more important than reminding them of their brokenness.
3. The work of reconciliation should be valued over making judgments.
4. Gracious behavior is more important than right belief.
5. Inviting questions is more important than supplying answers.
6. Encouraging the personal search is more important than group uniformity.
7. Meeting actual needs is more important than maintaining institutions.
8. Peacemaking is more important than power.
9. We should care more about love and less about sex.
10. Life in this world is more important than the afterlife.⁴

What do you think? How does the fact that we call ourselves Christian inform our responsibility to one another? How does our love as a church resemble Jesus and how do we extend that love into the community?

We walk in love. We work at love. We practice love. We learn to love. We love....even when it gets messy.

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, Center for Action and Contemplation, Daily Devotion November 1, 2019 using Phillip Gully's Book, If the Church Were Christian, 2010.

Introduction and Welcome to Worship:

Welcome to First Christian Church of Orange. Welcome to those of you participating online. We are part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and this congregation is Open and Affirming which is the language we use to explicitly welcome the LGBTQ+ community. We are also committed to the work of becoming a pro-reconciling/anti-racism congregation.

“They’ll know we are Christians by our love...” goes the song.

At no other time in the history of Christianity did love so characterize the entire church as it did in the first three centuries. And Roman society took note. Tertullian reported that the Romans would exclaim, “See how they love one another!”

Justin Martyr sketched Christian love this way: “We who used to value the acquisition of wealth and possessions more than anything else now bring what we have into a common fund and share it with anyone who needs it. We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies.”

Clement, describing the person who has come to know God, wrote, “He impoverishes himself out of love, so that he is certain he may never overlook a brother in need, especially if he knows he can bear poverty better than his brother. He likewise considers the pain of another as his own pain. And if he suffers any hardship because of having given out of his own poverty, he does not complain.”

When a devastating plague swept across the ancient world in the third century, Christians were the only ones who cared for the sick, which they did at the risk of contracting the plague themselves. Meanwhile, many were throwing infected members of their own families into the streets even before they died, in order to protect themselves from the disease.⁵

That was the church more than 2,000 years ago.

What are people saying about Christians today?

That’s our theme for the day...

⁵ <https://earlychurch.com/a-love-without-condition/>

