

“Living a Life of Love”

Based on Ephesians 4:25-5:2

First delivered Aug. 12, 2018

Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

Today is the second in a series of sermons taken from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. The letter has a strong emphasis on the central place of love in the church. Last week, we were challenged to build up the body of Christ in love. I talked about how our being in the body of Christ is a given. Just as your arm didn’t volunteer to be a part of your body, so you and I didn’t volunteer to be a part of the body of Christ. It is our calling. God has brought us together. The unity we have is given to us by God. Our challenge is to maintain, even build up, the body of Christ which has been brought together by God.

This week’s teaching relies on the givenness of our being the body of Christ. Again, one of the big points Paul is making is that the baseline of our relationship as Christians is unity. Paul calls it the spirit of unity in the bond of peace. This is the foundation upon which we can trust. We have divinely ordained unity. It is not something we achieve by our own actions. This means the unity we have received is not dependent on us, which is what makes the unity we have so precious and durable. This must be our hope because it is our tendency to strain unity, break off into factions, do our own thing. Left to our own devices, there would be no unity at all. The only unity that is dependable is the unity that God provides. We can be assured that we are united to God and that we are united with each other, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Perhaps you have heard of the concept of Ubuntu which comes from South Africa. It basically means “I am because we are.” If it was not for a community, I would not exist. My very existence depends on the existence of the community. What I am saying is that the community

we have is given to us by God. That is, the community which is the body of Christ. And because the body of Christ exists, you and I exist in the body. Our connectivity to each other simply is, in spite of the fact that we are not always mindful of our connectivity or sometimes even try to rip ourselves apart from each other. I'm stressing this point because it is so important in making sense of what Paul teaches about how we are to live together. If we can grasp how we are bound together by God's action, then it is only natural for us to love each other and to turn away from anything that would try to pull us apart.

So, by keeping this in mind, that we are united by the sheer will and grace of God, Paul challenges us this morning to live a life of love. By accepting that God has joined us together, loving each other becomes more of a natural action. We are joined together in the bond of peace so of course we love each other, build each other up, live a life of love together. Doing otherwise makes less sense if we accept that God has already bound us together.

So, what are the practical ways to live a life of love? Paul starts by telling us to put off falsehoods and speak truthfully to one another. People who love each other are honest with each other, even when it's a hard truth. Now we know how challenging this can be. I remember this commercial a few years back that showed what appeared to be honest Abe Lincoln with his wife who asks him, "Abe, does this dress make me look fat?" Abe didn't answer right away, giving us the impression he was calculating the cost of being truthful with his wife! Yes, we need to be honest and truthful with each other. But we need to think about how we are truthful, or how fully honest we will be. There can be a cost. The truth needs told in a way that it can be understood and received. Maybe not the whole truth needs to be shared. There's nothing wrong with using discretion when we tell the truth to each other. I remember one time when I was young, our youth group was having some kind of

devotional. I can't remember what we were asked but I said something to someone in the group in all honesty and with the best of intentions. But how I said it hurt her feelings. What I said was true but I said it in an unintentionally hurtful way. So, telling the truth instead of lying to each other is the way to go. That's what people who love each other do. But how we go about telling that truth needs to be considered so that our truth telling doesn't do harm but can be heard and received.

What next? Don't let the sun go down on your anger, lest you make room for the devil. There's that old truism for couples: never go to sleep mad at each other. It's fine to be angry for a while. But it's the holding on to that anger that becomes like a festering sore in our minds and hearts. Carrying a grudge is a real thing. I still carry a bit of a grudge with some experiences I had several years back. Holding on to anger from past slights, a misunderstanding, a poor choice of words, whatever it is...this really does harm the community. I see anger and truth telling as going together. If someone makes you angry, tell them. Don't stew about it. Don't tell everyone else about it. Don't suppress it. Tell it to the person that made you angry, and do it quickly so that the anger doesn't fester in your heart. Otherwise, it can just build up and build up until something happens that just lights the fuse and you have a big mess on your hands. So it's ok to be angry, but don't stay angry for long. Talk it out with the person who has angered you. Say your peace and then let it go. Holding on to that grudge or plotting your revenge doesn't do anyone any good.

The next thing Paul talks about is thievery. We are one community. But we also have to be responsible, not only in caring for our personal needs but also in contributing to the good of the whole. For example, if you have bills to pay you only have a few options: you can work and earn money, you can beg for money, or you can steal money. That would be the case in Paul's day. For us, we have a possible fourth

option which is to see about getting some money from the government, that is, our fellow tax payers. Not exactly begging or stealing. But let's set that aside. The point Paul is making is that of the three options in his day, working, begging or stealing, stealing is the only option that is a no-no. Begging is perfectly fine. But working is the preferred option. And not just working to care for your own needs but also so you have something extra to give to those who choose to beg. Working and begging are two acceptable ways to care for your needs. Only theft damages community. So Paul tells us not to choose that option.

“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.” This verse of Paul's is like pure water in the swampy stench that is our body politic. From Trump's Twitter feed and rallies to the evening opinion shows of cable news we are awash in talk that tears down rather than builds up. Friends, there may be no greater need in our time than to speak words of grace, words that build up others, to give them hope, encouragement, advice, whatever is needed. And as an aside, it would do us well to be discerning about who we choose to listen to. If someone is always tearing you down with their words, just let those words go through one ear and out the other. No one is making you watch these opinion shows on the cable news. I wish the media would stop talking about Trump's ridiculous tweets. I'm convinced a lot of what he tweets is intended to get people riled up as a distraction. Anyway, the point here is that words do have power. Words can tear down. But they can also build up. Paul is telling us to use words that build up.

To sum up what Paul is teaching, he gives us vv. 31 and 32: put away bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, and malice; be kind, tenderhearted, and forgive one another. Why? Because that's how people who are united in one body love each other. People who love each other are kind to each other, are tenderhearted toward each other

and forgive each other. I mean, it's obvious right? So if it's so obvious, why is it so hard?

The explanation that is closest to hand for us is the reality of sin. There is something let loose in the world that twists things up, that inhibits us from being our best selves as God created us to be. I understand sin to be like a congenital disease, or like a virus, a parasite that is foreign to who we are as those who are made in the image of God. Sin is like a disease that we all have to overcome. And by God's grace we can. This is the other thing Paul talks about, a word of encouragement for us, to build us up.

Paul tells us that we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit. We are marked with a seal for the day of redemption. As I thought about what this means, I thought of canning. My mother-in-law makes the absolute best canned peaches. It's not anything fancy. No secret ingredients. She carefully peels and cores the peaches. She then cuts them into bite sized chunks. She puts them in a simple sugar syrup. She fills up the mason jars, puts the seals on and then puts the jars in boiling water, making sure to get a tight seal. Then those jars of peaches sit around waiting to be eaten. We always get to take a few home with us and they sit in one of our kitchen cupboards. Then, at some point, we take one of those jars. Maybe wipe some dust off the top. Then we take a bottle opener and pry that seal until we hear "POP". Then Noah's usually the first in line with his bowl to dish up some of those delicious, sweet, fresh peaches. A little taste of heaven!

It's that tight seal that keeps those peaches fresh and tasty. It preserves them. I know, it's a stretch, but think about the seal of the Spirit as like the seal on that jar of peaches. The Spirit preserves our souls. In spite of all around us, including sin, that seeks to corrupt and spoil us, deep inside, the Spirit of God preserves us until that day when we are set free, the day of redemption.

This is all good news for us. The Spirit binds us together as the body of Christ. The Spirit seals and preserves our souls. God has done all this for us, assuring us that we belong, that we have a community and are not cut loose to drift aimlessly in the world, that who we are in our essence is protected and secure, all because of God's love for us. We have nothing to fear. We have nothing to lose. We belong to God and each other and this will never change.

If we can trust this to be so, that our lives and our community are in the hands of God, safe and secure, then we can have the confidence to be imitators of God as Jesus demonstrated for us. That is, we can take the risk to love one another. We can do all those things that Paul teaches us to do. We can be resolved to make love a way of life, that every thought, word and deed be shaped by love, just like what God does, the One who is love.