

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 11th Sunday After Pentecost, August 9, 2015

Talk to Your Neighbor!

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

August 9, 2015

Deuteronomy 5:1-22 Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Our first scripture reading this morning is of course the story of how Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. As I have said before, the first four commandments are encompassed in Jesus' Great Commandment to love God with all your heart, soul and mind. The final six are encompassed by Jesus' second commandment to love your neighbor --- respect your parents, don't murder or steal, don't commit adultery, don't lie about your neighbor and don't covet whatever your neighbor possesses.

Our reading from Ephesians is Paul's admonition to the church at Ephesus to love their neighbors, as Christ instructed.

In it Paul is providing concrete examples of what needed to happen in the lives of the Ephesians. All was not peaches and cream in the early churches, just as it isn't in our churches today. Back then, and even today, Christians struggled with anger, lying, hard feelings and bitterness. It is part of being a sinful human, and Paul is telling the Ephesians, and us, how to avoid these social problems.

Here in the South we are particularly prone not to speak an uncomfortable truth to someone. We hesitate to be frank lest we risk upsetting whoever it is we are talking to. Even when we need to be frank, we aren't.

Paul cautions us not to tell "white lies" but to be truthful with our neighbors when they have done something wrong. That is hard to do at times but it helps your neighbor if you tell them whatever the problem is in a kind way, not in anger. We need to speak out when things are wrong if we are ever to bring about changes in people. Anger at what someone does or says just festers unless it is addressed. Otherwise it won't go away. But be angry at the situation, not the person. Even Jesus got angry when he upended the tables of the money changers in the temple. Jesus was human and that episode showed his humanity.

Sometimes we need to speak out forcefully if we are to bring about changes.

Martin Luther King certainly did that.

Consider the growth of Nazism under Adolph Hitler before World War II. The free world stood by and did nothing. Britain's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain tried to appease Hitler and we all know the result of that.

Consider Apartheid in South Africa and in other places like the Israel-Palestine situation. In both cases the free world was angry but did and said little or nothing. Early intervention might have ended Apartheid in South Africa and might have resolved the Israel-Palestine problem but both situations were allowed to get way out of hand. The free world was angry, very angry, but did not speak up as should have been done.

There are times and places for anger and for strong action and intervention. We need to sort out when that is necessary and when the situation that caused the anger can be resolved in a kind and thoughtful way. Paul admonishes us not to let the sun go down on anger for to do so makes room for Satan. Tell people what they need to hear and you can head off many minor problems before they become major. It doesn't always work but it is the best course of action most of the time.

The Rev. Edyth Pruitt in a sermon on this same text a few years ago told the story of a military roadblock in a war zone. A private was stopping all traffic and telling people to turn around because there were unexploded bombs ahead on the road.

A passenger in one car got very angry when his car was waived to a stop and before the private could say anything, the passenger jumped out of the car fuming at having been stopped. The private saw that he had three stars on his shoulders and profusely apologized saying, "I didn't realize that you were a general when I flagged your car over. I am sorry if I made you angry. Continue on your way please."

That might have diffused the general's anger at that point but he was headed into a very dangerous situation by continuing on that road. This was a case of the private being nice when he should have been assertive and explained the situation.

We have to balance our emotions and reactions to what others do to avoid making room for the devil.

Paul admonishes us to tell our neighbors what they need to hear, not what they may prefer to hear. The general needed to be told about the danger, not that it was OK to proceed.

Paul also admonishes us not to fall prey to greed but to work honestly and to

help the needy. He also tells us to be careful of how we speak.

The January 23, 2013 devotional in Our Daily Bread said, *“Unwholesome speech was a problem even in the Apostle Paul’s day. He reminded the Christians at Ephesus that they should put away vulgarity, lewdness, slander, and obscene talk from their lives. These were expressions of their old lives and it was now out of place with their new identity in Christ. Instead their lives were to be characterized by wholesome speech. Their good or wholesome words would give grace to the hearers. The Holy Spirit would guard their speech ... and help them to use their words to benefit others.”*

What Paul is saying is to avoid errors of omission and commission --- omission by not telling our neighbors what they need to know when something angers you and commission by speaking in an improper manner to your neighbor.

Barbara Brown Taylor (God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1998) said, *“If the Christian church has lost its moral authority in our time, it is at least partially because we have not taken Paul’s advice ... We do not, on the whole, speak the truth to our neighbors. We are polite but noncommittal, wanting above all to be liked. We do not live as though we were members of one another. We fight with as much malevolence as any bunch of pagans, dividing ourselves into ‘us’ and ‘them’ at the drop of a hat. We are not kind so much as we are nice, which is about as bland a virtue as you can find, if it is a virtue at all ...*

“Very few of us were ever taught that anger is part of true love. Even fewer of us have been taught how to handle anger so that it is part of our health and not part of our sickness ... Being angry and sinning are two different things. The one does not have to lead to the other.”

As Paul said, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (NIV, 2011).

Amen.