

Wesley United Methodist Church      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
August 12, 2018  
Title: Living Together  
Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-5:2  
John 6:35, 41-51

“In peace that only thou canst give, with thee, O Master, let me live.”  
Living together can be really tough. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians recognizes that. His letter may have been sent to several churches that Paul knew about. It’s a more general letter than most of his letters and doesn’t address any specific situations but rather it gives us a good summary of Paul’s basic understanding of Christian thought and Christian living.

It was meant for teaching and worship among Christian gatherings. In the second half of the letter, part of what we read this morning gives instructions for Christians to consider ourselves a “body of Christ” and to live as if we are the presence of Jesus on earth.

Paul requires the faith communities to reorder their behavior in radical ways; ways that would make them stand out and be different from others. They, and we, are to speak the truth in love. There is to be no lying, theft, bitterness, bad temper, shouting, acting in anger, or abuse in the Christian community. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if it were so but we are all human and sometimes we fall short of the ideal. When we speak the truth to each other, we do not always do it in love or in a way that shows our love but rather in ways that sound harsh. Even when we experience righteous anger and participate in ways to try to change the situation with which we are justifiably angry, it is all too easy to find ourselves acting in unhealthy ways.

He wants us to live differently than other people. We are to think about behaviors that would be good for community health and develop habits of doing these kinds of things. We are to identify and avoid ways of life that destroy relationships and harm the community's health. Because we are God's children, we are to imitate God's love.

Most of Paul's directions make sense to us and we can likely agree that following his guidance would make life better but as we have likely all heard, and maybe said, "It's easier said than done."

While I was serving in Maine, I brought a young Korean pastor in to serve as pastor of an overwhelmingly white congregation. He was following a white female pastor who had been at the church for about 15 years. His ministry seemed to be going well and when I met with the Staff Parish Committee a few months later, they told me that they were really glad that I had brought a Korean pastor to them. They explained that they had no idea what to expect and that if I had brought a pastor similar to their previous one they might have made assumptions expecting this pastor to be like their previous one. But as they said, they didn't know what to expect.

They went on to explain, that because English was not his first language, he had stressed to them how important it was that they let him know if they didn't understand something he said and that he would do the same with them. This set up a communication pattern that was open and honest and that saved them from many potential misunderstandings. They felt free to ask him, "Did you really mean ...?" or "What did you mean when you said ...?" He was able to do the same with them.

Together they worked at paying careful attention to what the other said, and asking clarifying questions, knowing that asking questions and checking out perceptions was a good thing to do.

So often in our relationships, we don't make that effort. Maybe it's because we think we understand and make assumptions rather than check out our perceptions. The people of that church told me that in addition to asking their pastor for clarification, they had gotten better at asking each other for the same, rather than assuming that they knew what someone else meant. They were learning to communicate with each other in ways that were healthier than previously, and in the process, they were building up their congregation and its relationships in healthy ways.

Paul tells us that we may be angry, but we are not to allow our anger to cause us to sin. Paul understood that we are going to get angry about things but warns us to be careful that we do not allow the anger to control us and cause us to act in ways that destroy relationships. There are many things that we can and likely should get angry about, but how we handle that anger makes a difference.

The reality is that anger can and does kill. Sometimes it is our physical or emotional undoing as we carry it around in our hearts and stomachs. Other times it fuels riots or wars. Uncontrolled anger or unmediated anger kills.<sup>i</sup>

Some time ago during the movement to end nuclear weapons and the arms race, one wise observer reflected, "There's enough anger in the peace movement to start World War 111 all by itself!"<sup>ii</sup> When I read the emails I receive from both Democrats and Republicans, it is sometimes hard to tell the difference. Both are condemning what the other are doing but it often feels to me that they are both using the same tactics of bullying,

demonizing, name calling, fear, and you name it to get their message across.

Mother Teresa was asked once “Don’t you ever become angry at the causes of social injustice that you see in India or in any of the places in which you work?” Her response was “Why should I expend energy in anger that I can expend in love?”<sup>iii</sup> It is too easy to let anger take energy away from ways of confronting whatever it is that we are angry about.

On Friday night, as I watched NBC Evening News, I saw a story in their “Above and Beyond” segment that really caught my attention. It was a story about a white man named Ken Parker who joined the KKK in 2012 and eventually became a grand dragon. He was part of the white supremacist and white nationalist rally in Charlottesville a year ago. He described being angry when he left the Navy and couldn’t find a job and he blamed people with darker skin than him.

Then he met William McKinnon III, the pastor of All Saints Holiness Church in Jacksonville, Florida who invited him to attend Sunday morning worship. He figured he had nothing to lose and he and his fiancé attended worship in the black congregation of about 70 persons. He and his fiancé were two of the only three white people in the congregation. He was invited to share his testimony.

Parker told NBC News, “I said I was a grand dragon of the KKK, and then the Klan wasn’t hateful enough for me, so I decided to become a Nazi — and a lot of them, their jaws about hit the floor and their eyes got real big. But after the service, not a single one of them had anything negative to say. They’re all coming up and hugging me and shaking my hand, you know, building me up instead of tearing me down.”<sup>iv</sup>

He has since been baptized and has apologized for all he has said and done. He said, "I know I've spread hate and discontent immensely." He now speaks out against hate groups like the ones to which he belonged.

I think the people of All Saints Holiness Church would have been more than justified in being angry at Ken Parker, and probably even at their pastor for inviting him to come to their church. Instead they chose not to let anger take control of them. They recognized that even though he was filled with anger and hate he was still a child of God and they chose to love him as one of God's children, rather than to allow themselves to be drawn into the expressions of anger and hate. It appears that they have learned how to "be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us." In so doing, they have been the body of Christ and have helped a person filled with anger and hate to become someone who has been transformed by love.

It isn't easy to live the way that Paul describes but it is important. It is easy to make excuses and blame someone or something else for our behavior and our attitude. This morning Alex played a beautiful piece of music for us on our piano. If I had played the piano, as enthusiastically as he did, you would not have heard beautiful harmony. Instead you would have heard great discord. But Nobody would have claimed that the piano was at fault for my great discord. The same is true of life. In life there is plenty of opportunity for discord, disagreement, anger and other negative emotions. Alex has studied to play the piano correctly, so it was beautiful. I have not studied, and my playing would have been ugly but it would not have been the piano's fault.<sup>v</sup> It would have been mine.

Paul tells us that we need to learn how to be imitators of God and live in love. This takes time. It takes learning. It takes practice and most importantly

it requires us to be open to the Holy Spirit who empowers us in this new way of being together in community. We can do this only when we are nourished with the true bread of life – Jesus, the one who came to us in love and gave his life so that we could live as God’s beloved children.

We are nourished and strengthened by the bread of life claiming Jesus’ promise that “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” As Christians, it is our goal, our responsibility to live our lives as close to God as we can, so that we imitate God, acting in ways that Jesus teaches us and ways that help others to see Christ’s love in us.

“As a part of an assignment for a doctoral thesis, a college student spent a year with a group of Navajo Indians on a reservation in the Southwest. As he did his research he lived with one family, sleeping in their hut, eating their food, working with them, and generally living the life of a twentieth-century Indian.

“The old grandmother of the family spoke no English at all, yet a very close friendship formed between the two. They spend a great deal of time sharing a friendship that was meaningful to each, yet unexplainable to anyone else. Over the months he learned a few phrases of Navajo, and she picked up a little of the English language.

“When it was time for him to return to the campus and write his thesis, the tribe held a going away celebration. It was marked by sadness since the young man had become close to the whole village and all would miss him.

“As he prepared to get up into the pickup truck and leave, the old grandmother came to tell him goodbye. With tears streaming from her

eyes, she placed her hands on either side of his face, looked directly into his eyes and said, ‘I like me best when I’m with you’

“Isn’t that the way we feel in the presence of Jesus? He brings out the best in us. We learn to see ourselves as worthy and valuable when we are in His presence. The hurts, the cares, the disappointments of our lives are behind us when we look in His eyes and realize the depth of His love.

“Our self-esteem no longer depends on what we have done or failed to do; it depends only on the value that He places on us. To be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ”, to be imitators of God, living as God’s beloved children and living in love as Christ has loved us “is to generate in other people the Indian grandmother’s simple statement: ‘I like me best when I’m with you.’”<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Roth, Robert. “Beyond Anger” in Sojourner’s “Preaching the Word”

<sup>ii</sup> Price, Peter B. “Speak Truth to One Another” in Sojourner’s “Preaching the Word”

<sup>iii</sup> Hewett, James S. Editor Illustrations Unlimited, Tyndale Publishing, p.115

<sup>iv</sup> <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/401218-ex-kkk-member-who-marched-in-charlottesville-denounces-hate>

<sup>v</sup> Hewett, p.39

<sup>vivi</sup> Hewett, p.228