

Aug. 9, 2009

Ephesians 4: 25 – 5:2

John 1 : 1-5

Watch Your Mouth!

The first people who read the letter to the Ephesians back in the first century were trying to learn how to be Christians in a society that had never heard the Good News or the stories of Jesus. It was a society that had very unChristian standards, morals, and values. The Ephesian Christians had to work to keep from being drawn back into a lifestyle that was pagan in origin. All around them there were people who lied, cheated, stole, and who were angry about being lied to, cheated, and stolen from.

All around them were people who did not know the peace or the freedom found in knowing Christ. It was hard for these new Christians to keep from falling into the same type of behaviors that they saw every minute of every day.

I would have to say that sounds pretty similar to our experience these days.

But there is a difference. The difference is that most of us grew up in Christian homes, learning Christian values. So it may strike us as strange that anyone needs to be told not to be bitter or to hold on to anger, and not to steal. Then again, maybe not. But evidently the church in Ephesus needed to hear it.

The way they lived as Christians was influenced by the society around them. Because they heard bitterness and anger all around them, they had to fight against falling into the same habits. When all you hear around you is anger, sarcasm, gossip, ugly words, it rubs off on you. It's very difficult to keep a positive attitude when the very air around you is filled with negative, ugly, mean, hateful words!

When I was teaching, there was one year when two of my colleagues were going at it tooth and claw. They took turns coming into my classroom after the kids went home and filling me in on the latest horrible thing that the other had done.

It started off as merely venting their anger. I suggested that they talk it out with each other. They didn't.

It progressed to accusations and eventually to slander. I recommended and finally insisted that they talk to professional counselors, our boss, someone---ANYONE---else.

To no avail.

It affected my work. I resorted to cutting my preparations and my planning short so that I could leave the building before they showed up.

It affected my personal life. Not only did I take work home, but I also took home the anger and the frustration.

It affected my spiritual life. Both of these women claimed to be Christian and I questioned their faith, I questioned God's reluctance to strike them both with bolts of lightning, and I questioned why I had to be the one to hear all this garbage!

Beyond that, the anger, bitterness, malice were contagious. I was bitter that they had chosen me to be part of this mess. I was angry that they wouldn't work things out some other way. And I got to the point that I wished something bad would happen to both of them!

I think this is why Paul is including this warning to his readers. Once someone begins this way of speaking, it invades every part of life---not just their life, but the lives of everyone around them.

It's like an infection. It spreads and it's hard to cure. It completely kills the unity and the peace that Christ brings into our lives.

A wise friend of mine has pointed out to me that this kind of destructive language is poor stewardship. God has given us the gift of language, of speech, and this kind of angry, malicious talk is a waste, even an abuse of this gift of language that God has given us.

If you doubt the importance, the generosity of this gift from God, just imagine being unable to speak.

Some of us have known someone who lost the power of speech due to stroke. Those of us who have probably have seen the anger and frustration that come from not being able to communicate, and maybe we have felt the frustration of not being able to figure out what the other person was trying to tell us.

When we don't have the ability to use words, we have to find another way to feel like we have personal power, some control over our lives. We need to find another way to express what we are thinking and feeling and to ask for what we need.

I think most of you know that I used to be a special education teacher. I taught kids who had severe disabilities, mostly multiple disabilities. Many of my students had very little spoken language, and the rest

Had no words at all.

Yes, it was a challenge sometimes to teach them. Other times it seemed downright impossible. When all else failed, I just loved those kids, loved them the best way I could, loved them the way the Holy Spirit allowed me to!

We had a lot of fun together! A lot of good times! And some challenging times, too.

Now, you can imagine, with kids who can't speak, sometimes it was very difficult to figure out what they wanted, what they needed, why they were crying, or what they were scared or angry about.

It was very much like babies. Sometimes when a baby cries you just can't figure out where it hurts or what's wrong!

And did you ever think about a two-year-old? Why do they go through what we so lovingly refer to as "the terrible twos"? When they don't have enough language to tell you what they are feeling, they act out. When they can't do what they are trying to do, they act out.

When they're tired or hungry or just want to be somewhere else, but they don't even know what the problem is, they act out.

My students were like that, but in bigger bodies, with more complicated needs and with even fewer words to express them.

It's an interesting phenomenon that if my former students could only say half a dozen words, one would be "no!" and the rest would be profanities.

Why is it that kids learn exactly what you wish they wouldn't??

And beyond the limited and unacceptable words, there were the unacceptable, sometimes dangerous behaviors that came out of a desperate need to communicate.

My job was often to teach a more socially acceptable way to express frustration, anger, fear, and even affection.

Because it was my job, I accepted the challenge. More than that, I really enjoyed teaching better ways of communicating, in addition to teaching practical things like matching socks and other things that most kids learn at home, things that come easily to most kids.

I loved teaching. I loved those kids! One of my favorite little guys, Jordan, started off calling me the B word and stealing from me whenever I turned my head.

He ended up calling me what was his best effort at “Sharon” or sometimes “Bubbahead,” a term of endearment I had taught him as a replacement for the other b word. And he respected other people’s property. Mostly.

Jordan is my biggest success story----he is about 18 now and I would take him home in a heartbeat if something happened to his mom, who, by the way, is quite an amazing woman.

Jordan learned to communicate in better ways. He learned to ask for what he needed instead of just taking it or being angry.

He learned to use pictures, gestures, sign language, and some words to talk to us. In fact, he is one of the best storytellers I have ever known, and he tells those stories using only about 10 words, gestures, and pantomime!

The power of words! Once Jordan learned to communicate, he changed from an angry, hurting little boy to a loving, happy, well-behaved young man. Words built him up!

The ability to use language is a powerful gift,

A gift we squander when we use it to tear down, to destroy, when we use it in anger, bitterness, and malice. Paul tells us to speak only to build up, to edify. This is the way that God wants us to use our gift of language. This is the way we can, as Paul implores, imitate God.

God uses words to create, to lead us, to free us, to forgive us.

God said “Let there be light” and there was light. God spoke again and created the sun, moon, and stars, the dry land, the seas. The animals. And people. All by speaking.

The word of God creates.

God spoke again and lead Abraham to the land of Canaan, and again to free the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt by sending Moses to them.

God incarnate, Jesus Christ, spoke from the cross, "Father, forgive them," and so we are.

The word of God leads, frees, and forgives.

And so much more!

Today's passage from John begins "In the beginning was the Word." Before there was anything else, there was the Word. "The Word was with God, and the Word was God." Together in a blank universe, God and the Word. And the Spirit of God as well. The Trinity.

The Word is Jesus Christ. Before he became flesh and dwelled among us, he was the Word. He is still the Word.

Which makes me want to ask, How can we waste our words when the ultimate word is Christ?

Of course I know that not every word is the capital W Word; every word is not Christ! But maybe they should be. Maybe they could be!

Did God intend for the gift of language to be used the way it is so often used? To hurt, to tear down, to be wasted?

Or did God intend for this precious gift to be used the way Christ used it? To love, to forgive, to accept, to build up? And yes, when necessary, to point out the truth, to correct the errors.

Because building up, edifying, is not always sweetness and compliments. Sometimes it does require being honest and forthright.

Which is what Paul said, "Speak the truth in love." Not in anger. Not in scorn or derision. Speak the truth in love.

Just the way Christ did.

How can we do that? We are not Christ, the Word of God! We are only human, with our faults and weaknesses, with our personalities that include tempers, being overly sensitive or not very patient, being critical and picky.

So how can we avoid the anger, the bitterness, the words that tear down and destroy?

How can we imitate God? Paul tells us, "Be kind and forgiving and tenderhearted." Easy to say, not so easy to do sometimes!

He continues---“Be imitators of God as beloved children!”

Just like a little kid will put on Mom’s or Daddy’s shoes and pretend to be the parent, imitating their mannerisms, words, and actions, we can “put on Christ” as Paul says, and imitate God!

If it seems fake or forced at first, eventually it will become more natural to be forgiving, kind, and tenderhearted. It will help if we remember how much God loves us and how much God loves the person we are having trouble with!

I once heard some advice on how to cope with people who are difficult to get along with. I was told to imagine these letters written on the person’s forehead----

JDFM.

Got that? JDFM

Jesus died for me.

How can I be hateful and mean to someone that Jesus died for?

Someone that Jesus loves and has forgiven?

Someone who is a beloved child of God?

No matter what they have done, no matter what they are doing----

God loves them! Just like me, they are beloved children of God.

God loves each one of us and sent Christ to the wicked, the righteous, and the undone, as scripture says, because God so loved the world! And forgives us all.

In love, God gave us the gift of speech, to be used in love.

Remember my two contentious colleagues? One moved on to another school after that horrible year ended. The other found herself very lonely, having alienated the entire faculty, and moved on after a couple more years. Before she left, she wanted to know that I didn't hate her and I assured her I didn't.

As we hugged good-bye, I wished her love and happiness in her new job.

And I hope and pray that she has left behind not only that school but all the anger and bitterness she felt there.

Because only then will she find that happiness and love

Imitate God, beloved, and leave your anger and bitter words behind.