

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
13th Sunday after Pentecost
August 12, 2018

Only What Is Useful for Building Up

Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2

*So then... putting away falsehood...
let all of us... speak the truth... to our neighbors...
for we are members of one another.*

Wow! Here are words for today if there ever were any.
These words begin a whole series of admonitions given by the Apostle Paul
to the church at Ephesus.
In some Bibles, this section is given the rather uninspiring heading,
“Rules for the New Life.”
A better title might be
“The Calling of a Community of Character”

What I mean is this:
the admonitions in this passage—
as many as 14 of them, depending on how you count—
are not just rules for an individual to follow;
these are virtues and attitudes and dispositions
toward which a community must fervently strive
if that community wants to be Christian in character;
these virtues are virtues because they are *useful for building up* the community,
and the vices are vices because they would tear down community.

Paul has given the theological basis for these admonitions
in the first 24 verses of Ephesians chapter 4,
several of which are worth hearing today
before we move into the second part of the chapter:
*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you
to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,
with all humility and gentleness, with patience,
bearing with one another in love,
making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit
in the bond of peace.*
*There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,
one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,
who is above all and through all and in all.*

He goes on to speak of the gifts of the Christian community,
given... *to equip the saints for the work of ministry,
for building up the body of Christ,*

Paul is aware that there are many people with many agendas
who are ready to tell bald faced lies for the sake of advancing their agendas.

Like all of us,
Paul and his churches have been burned enough times to know this.

So he adds,
*We must no longer be children,
tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine,
by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.*

The contrast Paul puts forward then,
the community of character
which Paul would have us form and have form us,
comes about this way—

*But speaking the truth in love,
we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,
from whom the whole body,
joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped,
as each part is working properly,
promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.*

When I read these words, I'm sympathetic with Jill Duffield, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*,
who wrote,

"Reading these verses from Ephesians this week elicited two reactions.
The first and most powerful one was a deep, grief-filled longing.
The second was a question:
Is such a community possible?
All this kindness and speech that builds up
and this putting away of anger sounds too utopian to be true.
I am on social media, after all," she adds.
"Despite my pithy plastic keychain that reads, "Never read the comments,"
I do, in fact, read the comments, all the comments.
I read Yelp reviews and watch the news, too.
In these spaces, wrangling and wrath prevails.
Bigly."¹

It is commonplace today,
for people of a certain age (and I would be one of that age)
to bemoan how the human experience is fundamentally changing
given how much of it is now spent interacting with a screen
sometimes with a physical human on the other end of the wires and signals,
and sometimes not.

And it is also commonplace to observe — sadly, commonplace —
how unbridled people become, how unkind...
even how downright hateful...
when interacting on social media.

I came across a little scientific article about this
in the current issue of National Geographic,
written by an evolutionary anthropologists—
basically a guy who studies all the things that influence human behavior
and how those things have evolved over time.

His name is Augustin Fuentes, and he teaches at Notre Dame.²

“We’ve all heard the diet-conscious axiom

‘You are what you eat.’

But [Fuentes says] when it comes to our behavior, a more apt variation is

‘You are whom you meet.’

How we perceive, experience, and act in the world

is intensely shaped by who and what surround us on a daily basis—
our families, communities, institutions, beliefs, and role models.

“These sources of influence find their way even into our neurobiology.

Our brains and bodies constantly undergo subtle changes

so that how we perceive the world plays off of, and maps to,

the patterns of those people and places we see as most connected to us.

“This process has deep evolutionary roots

and gives humans what we call a shared reality.

[On the upside] this connection between minds and experiences

enables us to share spaces and work together effectively,

more so than most other beings.

It’s in part how we’ve become a successful species.

“But [Fuentes observes]

the ‘who’ that constitutes ‘whom we meet’ in this system has been changing.

Today the who can include

more virtual, social media friends than physical ones;

more information absorbed via Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram

than in physical social experiences;

and more pronouncements from ad-sponsored, 24-hour news outlets

than from conversations with other human beings.

“**Historically [he notes]**

we have maintained harmony by displaying compassion and geniality,

and by fostering connectedness when we get together.”

However, “anonymity and the lack of face-to-face interaction on social media platforms

remove a crucial part of the equation of human sociality—

and that opens the door to more frequent, and severe, displays of aggression.”

Fuentes does not leave us in despair, but offers us good news, as well,
from the perspective of evolutionary anthropology.

The scientific good news is this:

“Humans are evolutionarily successful

because our big brains have allowed us to bond together

and cooperate in more complex and diverse manners than any other animal.

The capacity to observe how the world operates,

to imagine how it might improve, and to turn that vision into reality

(or at least make the attempt)

is the hallmark of humanity.

“And therein lies the solution to the problem.
We are equipped with the skill set both to quell aggression
and to encourage cohesion.”

This science sounds a little like Paul’s saying we have God-given gifts,
*to equip the saints for the work of ministry,
for building up the body of Christ.*

And the antidote to much of our social media angst these days,
sounds like it may be exactly what is described in the Book of Acts, chapter 2:
*All who believed were together...
Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple,
they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,
praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.
And day by day the Lord added to their number
those who were being saved.*

“Being saved” here means being incorporated into the life-giving community.

Jame Calvin Davis would agree.³
In case you don’t recognize the name yet,
he’s the guy listed in your bulletin
as the speaker for the Churchwide Retreat at Bonclarken,
happening in just about a month — you really don’t want to miss it.

He is going to speak on the subject of Christian friendship,
and he’s entitled his presentations, “Reforming Friendship.”
The good Lord knows, in these days of “friending” and “unfriending”
our notions of friendship could use some reforming.
James has given a lot of thought to the fundamental connection between
cultural context and the cultivation of character.
The sermon title he’s given us for the upcoming retreat worship
could well have been the title of today’s sermon,
“A Time for Communities of Character”

He will lead us also in considering how the primary witness of the Christian community today
may be to demonstrate to the world God’s intention for human community —
a place where we *speaking the truth in love*, and build one another up,
a place where we learn things like
*Be angry but do not sin;
do not let the sun go down on your anger,
and do not make room for the devil.*

Speaking of timely and relevant admonitions...

*Be angry but do not sin;
do not let the sun go down on your anger,
and do not make room for the devil...*

there seems no more appropriate day to read this one aloud in church
than on the one year anniversary of the death of Heather Heyer,
who was mowed down by an angry white nationalist
who had come to Charlottesville to vent his anger
at the Unite the Right rally,
and who rammed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters.

I suppose that might count as making room for the devil.
It seems we're making quite a lot of room for the devil in our dear country these days.
Anger begets anger.
And anger can turn deadly.

Jesus knew something about anger that can turn deadly.
His opponents were angry with him.
But Christ did not return anger for anger,
at least not ultimately.

He did become angry, at times,
which the gospels relate in several places.

But in the end, Christ gave himself up for us.

**Rather than let the anger of his enemies beget more and more anger in him,
he responded with loving persistence
and gave himself up.**

That's what the cross of Christ means.

It makes no biblical sense what—so—ever
for a Neo-Nazi or a White Supremacist or a White Nationalist
to use the cross of Christ as their symbol as they do,
while saying things like,
we may not start the violence but we'll darn well finish it...
with our clubs, with our guns, with our weaponized cars.

Jesus met the violence head on.
But not that way.

He did not meet violence with violence.
He gave himself up for us.

So whether the perpetrators are driving crucifixion nails into the flesh of a human hand,
or a weaponized car into a crowd of human bodies,

Paul says,
*be imitators of God, as beloved children,
and live in love,
as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...*

You know, the baptism of our infants is an adorable, picture-worthy moment.
But lets not kid ourselves with the cuteness.

The sacrament of baptism is a sacrament of death and resurrection for a reason.

In baptism, we go under the waters of death, killing off the old self,
so the we may be raised with Christ to newness of life.

It's cute with babies,
because there seems to be very little old self to be killed off,
but this is not a naive liturgy for us'
we know what is coming in the life of this little child,
as it has come for all of us.

So every time we smile sweetly at the wide-eyed innocent beauty
of a child in baptismal garments,
if we want to be people of any integrity,
we had better be shoring up our resolve and commitment
to show up in the community of faith...

to show up for the face to face formation of character,
and to learn to exhibit these behaviors that are useful for building up,
and to learn not to tolerate, much less participate in,
the behaviors that are destructive of human community.

For the sake of little Avery Katherine Blanding,
and in remembrance of Heather Heyer, who was little once, too,
we can't afford not to show up

...and be the church of Jesus Christ in the world.

¹ Jill Duffield, "Looking Into the Lectionary.' *The Presbyterian Outlook*, August 6, 2018

² Augustin Fuentes, "Are We as Awful as We Act Online?" *National Geographic*, August 2018, 17-19.

³ See James Calvin Davis, *Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017)