

“The Best Advice”

Text: John 6:35, 41-51; Psalm 130; **Ephesians 4:25-5:2**

“Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents.” (Ephesians 5:1 The Message)

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INTRODUCTION:

“Sometimes” biblical scholar and translator of *The Message* Bible, Eugene Peterson, reminds us, “a single word can mask itself in seeming insignificance, and yet that very word serves as a pivot point for the words around it.”¹ For the writer of the letter to the Ephesians “therefore” is such a word. It marks the beginning of the transition at Ephesians 4:1, “*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling....*” The writer’s “therefore” connects everything that God is and does (the subject of the letter to this point) to everything that we are and do (the subject of the rest of the letter). The transitional passage, Ephesians 4:1-16, takes us from the church as God creates and inhabits it, to the church as we inhabit and participate in it, the country in which we grow up to maturity, to “*the measure of the full stature of Christ*” (Eph. 4:13b). For the writer the Christian life is a church-conditioned way of life, and must be congruent with who God is and the way God works in church, in us.

The writer posts a second “therefore” (4:17) to mark the completion of the transition. For the rest of the letter the spotlight turns to us: what we do and the way we do it. The living and the doing of the Gospel are present in Ephesians – the “invitation and the imperative.”² You are a child of God; now become a child of God. You are a new person in Christ; now grow up into that new person. Our text this morning from Chapter 4:25-5:2 draws our focus on how to grow up. Hear the word of God!

25So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. 26Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27and do not make room for the devil. 28Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. 29Let 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. 30And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. 31Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, 32and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

5Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, 2and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), p. 187.

² Maxie Dunnam, *The Communicator’s Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1982), p. 207.

SERMON:

Imitation, so the saying runs, is the sincerest form of flattery. But it is more than that, isn't it? It is basic to how we learn. Whether a new skill or ability, we learn by imitation.

Today we celebrate Westminster's work with Habitat for Humanity. I can't begin to tell you how many times over the years I've heard one or another of you talking about watching Carson Salyer or Steve Lainhart on a Habitat sight, learning by watching and imitating.

Likewise in the Olympics. Hearing someone fresh off the medal platform talk about being a youngster ten or fifteen years ago, and watching a runner or archer or swimmer and imitating their stride or form or stroke; imitating their drive, determination, dedication until their Olympic dream became a reality in Tokyo this year.

I have a great friend, Bill Carter, who is a terrific preacher but may be an even better jazz pianist. He told me the way he learned to play jazz was his teacher would set up a record player and put on an album of Oscar Peterson, Dave Brubeck, Fats Waller, or Art Tatum play it and tell Bill, "OK, play what you hear." "My first thought," Bill said, "was that guy has twenty fingers, where do I get an extra ten?! But then I would hear a chord progression and soon discern a style and over time, by imitation, I could learn that style and then be on to the next one until I finally found my own."³

It's just as true for ministers as anyone else, we learn by imitation. The question will sometimes come up in a class or casual conversation, "Tell me about your call to ministry? When did you first hear the call? How did you know God was calling you?" For me, that call came relatively early, when I was fourteen or fifteen, though it got side-tracked for a couple of years, and I learned earlier this week that one of the pivotal people God used in the process, just died. Tuesday night I was in an Adult Education meeting to plan Kick-off on August 22nd - all the classes and programs in place for the fall - when my phone rang. Seeing who it was I stepped out to take it. It was Bobby Norris, pastor of The Royal Poinciana Chapel in Palm Beach, FL, calling to tell me our home pastor, Keith Brown, had died. Just hearing Keith's name brought a host of memories flooding back. Keith came to my home church in the late 1960's as Assistant Pastor to the venerable Lloyd Ogilvie and quickly became Associate Pastor. After Lloyd left Keith was asked to be the Interim Pastor and, two years later, was called to be the Senior Pastor as a very young man. He remained as Senior Pastor for over a quarter century then became Co-Pastor, Senior Associate Pastor, and finally Pastor Emeritus. The last time I saw him was when I happened to be back in Bethlehem about ten years ago and my home church was celebrating the 50th anniversary of his ordination. He was as positive, energetic, alive-in-Christ and other-focused then as he was in mid-1970's when I was a teen. My call to ministry, along with about twenty-five others of my generation like Bobby Norris, came from observing Keith and imitating him. This week will mark my 35th anniversary of ordination when on a steamy August afternoon punctuated by thunderstorms Keith laid hands on me and prayed over me. I can tell you,

³ Bill Carter, pastor First Presbyterian Church of Clarks Summit, PA, private conversation.

anything that I've done since that has been beneficial to upbuilding the church and loving God's people I learned from watching and imitating him.

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The author of Ephesians tells us if we want to become mature in our faith, if we want to grow up into the people we were created to be, we should "*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.*" How do we do that? Our text from John suggests we look to Jesus: "*It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God.*"⁴ In his book on Ephesians, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ*, Eugene Peterson observes,

We are not cramming for an exam that will provide us for a certificate for good resurrection behavior or admission to heaven; we are absorbing into our praying imaginations a way of being. Watch what God does, and then do it [God's] way. Like children who learn proper behavior from hanging around their parents, be imitators of God, keep company with God. Read the stories of Abraham and Moses, Joshua and Caleb, Deborah and Ruth....And Jesus. Most of all Jesus: Jesus and his mother, Jesus and Herod, Jesus and Zacchaeus, Jesus and Peter, Jesus and Judas, Jesus and Mary Magdalene....We marinate our prayers and our behavior in these stories that reveal God and [God's] ways to us.⁵

That's why we on staff are so committed to Bible Study. I'll be starting a Disciple I class that is an overview of the whole Bible starting in September on Thursday's over lunch so those of you who work can participate. And Donovan will be teaching a class this fall called *What Would Jesus Do?* Not long ago, that was a fairly popular question. These days, the question arises more frequently and with more fervor than ever. We think the answer might come from looking at Jesus' own journey by a slow reading of the Gospels starting with Mark.

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The writer of the letter to the Ephesians now gives us some specific directions for living the new life Christ has given us. This involves *putting away* certain things, and beginning to act and relate in certain ways. The new ways of acting and relating are signs of newness of life.

The first has to do with our speech. In verses 25, 29, and 31 the writer refers to our speech. In the first two instances he sets the positive way of speaking against the negative. "*Putting away falsehood, let us speak the truth to our neighbors*" (v. 25). "*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up...*" (v. 29).

⁴ John 6:45-46, NRSV.

⁵ Peterson, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

One scholar has written “Of all deeds, words are the most revealing, the most instantly available, the most freighted with personal significance.”⁶ The thought that words are deeds is fresh but not new. In Hebrew, thought, word, and deed are not too distinct from one another; indeed word and deed have the same root. To say something was to do something.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had discovered this, and he witnessed to it in the Flossenberg Prison during WWII where he had been condemned to die. He walked the narrow corridors visiting the cells, speaking to prisoners, and encouraging them, laughing and joking with them, reminiscing with them and praying with them. His words were his primary means of ministry. Still his words were deeds. He wrote, “God had put [God’s] word into our mouths in order that it may be communicated to others. The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to [them]. [That one] needs that friend again and again and again.”⁷

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Another new way of acting and relating has to do with our temper. *“Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil”* (Eph. 4:26).

Anger is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, and we need to acknowledge when we look to Jesus we see he expressed anger. So we need to talk about anger, because anger is a holy trait, and it is a trait that God has bequeathed to God’s children.

Technically speaking, anger is an emotion. It comes to all of us. Anger is sparked by conflict. Something unwanted happens, and that sets off sparks. A deed is done or a word is spoken, and somebody “sees red.” We get angry because we care about something or someone, or because we want something to go our way. And when it doesn’t, the heart pumps faster, blood pressure rises, and adrenaline spurts into our system. Our faces can contort, the countenance darkens, and words either fly or become very intense and specific.⁸

There is righteous anger, as with Jesus who cares deeply about the things of God, when he sees things that break God’s heart, and discovers that the business in God’s house is not as God intends it to be. And there is deadly anger, with the power to consume us and destroy others. The line between “righteous” and “deadly” is a dotted line and scripture speaks a word of caution to help us discern between them.

Those who live their lives driven by anger eventually pay a bitter personal price, as Frederick Buechner points out in this oft-quoted passage from his book, *Wishful Thinking*:

⁶ Dunnam, op cit., p. 214.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*, Eberhard Bethge, ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1972), p. 109.

⁸ Bill Carter, “*Seeing Red*” a sermon preached on March 14, 2010. I’m indebted to Bill for helping me thing through this section.

Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back — in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.⁹

The letter to the Ephesians moves on to supply some practical advice on how to manage anger, righteous or otherwise. “*Do not let the sun go down on your anger*” (4:26). Don’t hang on to it obsessively. That’s good advice for all of us, especially as we seek we to grow up to maturity, to “the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

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Finally, the letter gives guidance on our way of relating. “*For we are members of one another*” the author says. “*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you*” (Eph. 4:25, 32). This is a beautiful description of how we are to relate to others. The pattern has been given to us by Christ. Whenever the New Testament talks of love behind it is the shadow of the cross.

Early on in my training this was brought home in a surprising way. Between my second and third year at seminary I did a year-long internship in a church in Arlington, VA. It was the home church of a friend from seminary and during that year he was planning on marrying a fellow classmate. So Howard and Bronwen came down a couple months before the wedding and one of the members organized a shower for them. I don’t know about you, but as a twenty-something year-old guy I wasn’t at all familiar with wedding showers. So I was pretty surprised when an official invitation came and included the request to “*Bring Your Best Advice for the Couple!*” Really? What’s the line about “unsolicited advice?” Well, I went, and found myself, to no surprise, the youngest person there other than the couple. And there we were, sitting in a circle, balancing delicate bone-china tea cups on our knees, patiently waiting as each person around the circle distilled their pearls of marital wisdom. I remember none of it, only how awkward and embarrassed I felt for my friends. That is until Harriet spoke. Harriet was a widow and one of the wise-women of the church. She went last and said, simply, “I only have this to say: be kind to one another.” That was it; full stop. Where others had droned on, her brevity had the effect of the Gettysburg Address. As the silence deepened with everyone’s surprise that she was really finished, you had the sense that an oracle had been delivered. “Be kind to one another.” All these years later, I still think it is the best advice.

“*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God* (Eph. 5:1-2). May it be so for all of us. AMEN.

⁹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (Harper & Row, 1973), 2] as quoted in Carlos Wilton’s article from *Homiletics Online*, “How to Talk Like a Christian” shared by the author.