

Sermon Preached by the Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
August 8, 2021 Pentecost 11/Proper 14/Year B
Texts – 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸ Thieves 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. ²⁹ Let 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. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. 5 ¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

This text was written to all of us. The title says it's to the Ephesians, but we can think of it as a letter to us here on August 8, 2021 at St. Margaret's in Belfast, Maine. Let us hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.

"Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another." All of us struggle at times with the truth, even those who strive to be upright and honest. The fact is sometimes truth thwarts our plans and desires, and it's just a little easier to bend it this way or that to suit our needs. And, unless we're talking about straight facts supported by evidence anyone can see in plain sight – things like the COVID vaccine is highly effective against significant disease and masks protect all of us – unless we're talking about those kinds of things, truth is often many-sided. We rarely have access to the whole of it. Truth lends itself to multiple perspectives and interpretation.

So how do we put away falsehood in that complicated context? How do we speak truth to our neighbors? How do we live into the reality that we are members of one another? And, to add more urgency to these questions, how do we do this when anxiety is high and tensions are rife within the community. You know what that is like, as you lived through it several years ago. And our society know what it is like, as we are living through it now.

The discipline and practice of listening to each other is the key first step. Listen first to what the other is saying, not with the aim of rebuttal, but with the aim of understanding. Listen also to the depth of emotion behind what she is saying. Falsehood finds a way in when we are too quick to react. Especially when the conversation is tense, the better part of wisdom is to pause before you speak, pause before you hit the send button, pause before you allow falsehood to overcome you. Express your love for the other by genuinely trying to understand them, by genuinely listening to them.

The passage goes on. "Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil." I grew up in a household where anger was not an acceptable emotion. Perhaps some of you had a similar experience. I know other people who grew up in homes where anger was the only acceptable emotion. I had a few friends whose homes were like that. But in my household, we were expected to hold anger in, to press it down, even deny it. And don't ever let it out, because anger was ugly, unseemly, even unchristian. If you expressed anger, you somehow were out of control. Both my parents were children of alcoholics, so they knew a lot about what life looked like when things got out of control. They certainly did not want that for their family. So the unspoken message was, don't let anger ever be seen, because it might take over and ruin everything.

But, of course, everyone gets angry, and sometimes for very good reasons. Paul acknowledges that. "Be angry," he says. "But do not sin." In other words, acknowledge your anger. Express it appropriately and direct it to

the right place. But don't live your life there. Don't use your anger as a weapon to verbally assault everyone in your path. Don't turn anger into your personal art form. And here's one especially appropriate for the age in which we live – don't allow your anger, however legitimate, drive you to unjustly castigate or scapegoat entire groups of people who really have nothing to do with the reasons for your anger. It might make you feel better, but it's a prime example of the sin Paul warns about. Anger, while completely normal and often justified, is also the devil's playground.

Don't steal. Ok. Got that one. Although, it's not as simple as you think. Stealing is not limited to overtly committing the crimes of shoplifting or robbing a bank. It relates to any deception in any of our dealings. When we think of it that way, it suddenly becomes more challenging. And do honest work. Got that one, too. But there's a significant tag at the end of that one: do honest work so you'll "have something to share with the needy." That gets back to the opening line. We are, as Christians, "members of one another." Another person's need is our need. Our honest work enables the needs of all to be met.

"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, so that your words may give grace to those who hear." Let's admit it – sometimes it's fun, in a warped way, to say nasty things to a friend about someone else you really don't like, maybe even despise – a co-worker, an extended family member, a political leader, a church leader, a fellow parishioner. And even if we don't derive much fun out of it, it does sometimes provide relief, especially when the one you're saying it to shares your sentiments. It's your little shared, tasty treat, secured at the expense of another. The all-too-common human dynamic is that we build ourselves up by tearing someone else down. It happens every day in middle-school lunchrooms. It sadly has become the typical discourse among too many politicians. It tears churches apart. And the devil's playground keeps getting larger. Those who resist the tide of meanness are mocked for being weak. But they're not weak. They are trying to restore a little grace to our social interactions. They are trying to build up, not tear down. And in a hostile environment, nothing takes more courage and strength of character than offering the gift of grace.

"Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." There it is in a nutshell. The Christian life, our response to God in Christ as it shows itself in our relationships with one another. This is what life together is supposed to look like. As you anticipate the call of your next rector, hopefully sometime in the next several months, hold out that vision.

I'm reminded of the famous line from Rodney King. Remember him? He's the one who was brutally beaten by L.A. police officers back in 1991, an incident caught on videotape. We might like to think that, thirty years later, such events are now rare. But we know better. The officers' acquittal the next year set off a wave of riots in the city. In the midst of it all, Rodney King said simply, "Can we all just get along?"

In our time of social division and tension, getting along would be a great thing. It would be a good step in the right direction. But our letter today calls Christians to something far greater than just getting along. It's a testament to God's vision for life within the Church and, I believe, within society. We are not strangers asked to tolerate one another, to just get along. We are members of one another. Look around. See not a stranger. See not an acquaintance. See not even a friend with whom you share a set of common interests. Look around and see those whom Christ loves. See those for whom Christ gives his life. Be imitators of God. Be that fragrant offering to one another. And live in love.