

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, August 9, 2009
Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

How would you describe living the Christian life? In our passage from Ephesians last week we read Paul's description of the Christian community – we all have gifts to contribute to our common life, to our common walk of discipleship. We all need to ground ourselves. Later on in the same chapter, we find Paul's rules for living in Christ's way – it does read like a manual for healthy relationships, doesn't it. Be kind, be truthful, be forgiving, if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all. That particular one takes me back to my childhood – remember the story of Bambi – I think it was Thumper who was told by his mother, If you can't say somethin' nice, don't say nothin' at all. Those were certainly words that I heard over and over again growing up – didn't you? And there is truth to that.

But there's another instruction here in this passage that we don't hear very often: be angry but do not sin. Let's think about that for a few minutes – can you think of a time in your life when you were really angry? Add to that, angry without sinning? Without calling that person a bad name under your breath? Honestly, can anybody be angry with another person without taking bad about that person behind his or her back? Without yelling at this person, or at least giving them a piece of our mind?

We have trouble with anger, don't we. Somehow we think we're not supposed to feel that way – this is an interesting one for the confirmation classes too – they too think anger isn't good but then when we talk about how Jesus displayed his anger in the temple by driving out the moneychangers, overturning tables – this scene is especially vivid in "Jesus Christ, Superstar" which we see every year. So we come to the conclusion that it's not so much about being angry but what we do with that anger.

Let's look at this passage in context – Paul writes, "Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you."

Paul's words sound strange to many people of our culture today – I think including to us Christians as well. We do not, sadly, always speak the truth to our neighbors when it's appropriate, even necessary. We are polite, noncommittal, so often, wanting above all else to be "nice" – to not make waves. We want to be liked. It seems that our culture teaches us to be shallow in our relationships with others – keep your safe distance from other people. And don't let anyone so close to you that they can hurt your feelings.

And because our culture tends to teach us to be guarded like this in our relationships, we so often don't live as though we were members of one another. What does Paul mean by that? Remember he is talking to church members, member of the Body of Christ. Living as though we are members one of another means, contrary to what our culture teaches us, we are supposed to enter into very close relationships with each other. As close as a close-knit family. Close enough to take the risk, to expose ourselves to the danger of getting our feelings hurt, feeling safe in the group.

Today, it seems to me that being “nice” is what seems to be the highest virtue. To be nice and to be liked by everyone. It also occurs to me that we have to begin to understand that being nice is not the same as being kind which is what Jesus calls us to be. Paul isn’t concerned about being nice. He doesn’t care if he’s liked. Nobody ever taught him that if you can’t say somethin’ nice, don’t say nothin’ at all. You see, Paul knows that when real people live in close relationship to one another, they will discover real differences and suffer real discord. And this is true whether the relationship is a marriage, a family, a neighborhood, a church, or a whole society. Remember, we’re called to unity not uniformity. It’s just not possible to love one another without also disliking, even perhaps hating one another from time to time. We’ve all heard it said, “There is a fine line between love and hate.” And that’s true, isn’t it. Love and hate really are close to one another. Why? Because they both generate a passion in us. Because they are both aspects of a close relationship. Now, I’m not saying that anger and family feuds are good and healthy signs of love.

There is a big difference between a good, healthy disagreement and making up afterwards and a dysfunctional kind of family relationship where there is violent and hateful behavior. Anger, arguments, even fights are a normal part of every close relationship, aren’t they. When someone tells me, we’ve been married for 20 years and we’ve never fought – I get a little suspicious. That’s just not true. My parents were married for 61 years and I know they had their disagreements. When I meet with engaged couples, I give them a handout a very wise seminary professor gave us – how to fight fair with your partner. Arguments, disagreements, even anger – they’re all normal responses, normal emotions – let’s not deny them. Because I think when we deny them, we open the door to the dangers Paul speaks of.

When a time of disagreement comes, Paul says, don’t shut up, or shut down, or disappear. Speak the truth in love. Be angry but do not sin. “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

In stark contrast to Paul’s words, many people in churches today, as soon as they have a disagreement, they’re out the door. But guess what, disagreements, anger, arguments happen in the best of churches. It’s how we handle those disagreements that counts – there are those folks who end up hopping from church to church without ever experiencing the joy that can be in a good, old fashioned church fight. Working through the differences, speaking what we perceive as important, is a good thing because we care about our church, our brothers and sisters. Hearing different opinions, even opposing opinions, can be healthy for a decision making process, healthy for a church.

My home church made a covenant one year that 25% of all income off the top would go to mission and outreach. That was great until the budget crisis hit them just like it does in every church. At Annual Meeting one year someone made a motion that they reduce this percentage – I’m here to tell you that created quite a stir. But the wonderful part of it was that people talked – people were passionate about their opinions – you might say it was one of those great old fashioned church fights. And how healthy it was for that church – and what a challenge for the moderator of the meeting. But it was a good discussion – it ended in compromise – all people felt they had been heard, they made a decision that while not everyone liked it, they all owned it. Every year at annual meeting they re-visit this percentage – every year there’s disagreement – but every year

they work it through and look for more creative ways to expand their mission outreach, even when money is tight.

On the other hand, another church has been dealing with the question of handicapped access for probably 20 years. Whenever the subject comes up – and it does regularly – people dance around the conflict. At one of the Council meetings somebody actually said, “We have to be Christian. We have to be nice. We can’t fight.” So the passionate conversations take place in the grocery store, at the gas stations, after the meetings. And nothing has happened for over 20 years – folks with mobility problems can’t get to worship. Frustration abounds on both sides – and I fear that frustration and suppressed anger is taking a toll on that church. How wonderful it would be if they would have a good, healthy church fight! Then perhaps they could make their differences work for them and come up with some creative solutions. They all care about the church for sure but they just won’t take the risk of saying what’s on their minds in the right places in front of each other. Being “nice” all the time doesn’t encourage openness to our differences, does it.

Of course, I’m not encouraging everyone to express their anger all over the place all the time – there are people who do that – they go around like walking volcanoes, spewing unpleasantness on whoever gets in their way – they always seem so mad at the world. We’ve all met them.

No – on the contrary, occasional anger and arguments and disagreements are a natural part of our living together in close relationship. And as we continually work out our differences, our disagreements, we can find that our bonds are strengthened, that our feelings for each other, our love and our respect for each other grow. And that takes work. Hard work.

So what do we do? How do we behave? Be angry, but do not sin, says Paul. Speak the truth. Be kind. Forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Christians should know there is such a thing as a good fight: read the Bible. God fought with those God loved the most: Abraham, Moses, David, Job. Jacob wrestled with an angel. Jonah got sent to his room inside a big fish. Jesus yelled at his disciples as if they were a bunch of school boys sometimes. He called the Pharisees every name he could think of in order to get their attention. But from day one, divine anger has been anger that means to heal and not to harm. To unite and not to divide.

There’s another familiar expression here in Paul’s letter: do not let the sun go down on your anger. Psychologists tell us of the danger of allowing anger to fester inside of us – when it’s stored up it becomes rancid. When anger is stored up it becomes bitterness. And bitterness is always condemned as sinful in scripture.

Divine anger means to heal – not to harm.

Divine anger doesn’t use the silent treatment. Divine anger doesn’t withdraw from unpleasant or uncomfortable situations. Divine anger isn’t passive-aggressive. Divine anger responds. Divine anger responds to wrong, to injustice, to oppression. Divine anger opens the door to relationship, to reconciliation, to creative change – in ourselves, in our churches, and in our society.

For instance, how many of us get angry at reports of the death of children in abusive homes? How many of us get angry about funding cutbacks for social services, about corruption in government, about any number of political, social or economic injustices. And how often do we let the sun go down on that anger? Too often I fear –

when we're angry and upset, do we write our congressperson, take a stand publicly, make our voice heard in protest?

What would have happened if Dr. Martin Luther King hadn't gotten angry?

The challenge, then, for each of us is not to avoid being angry – not at all. This is not the Biblical perspective on anger – the experience of anger is not sinful. It is a part of our humanity and reflects the anger expressed by God himself! The challenge is to deal with our anger – not to turn it inward, not to bury it. But to use it, the God-given anger, the anger that is part of true love, the anger that touches our passion, to move closer to each other and to the God who has taught us that we need each other – that we need to live in close and open relationship to each other to become fulfilled, whole, human beings. So may it be in our homes, our workplaces, our church, and our society. Amen.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, teach us on this day and always to follow the Way of Love which you have revealed to us through your Son Jesus. Help us to glorify your name by learning to show forgiveness, affection, and love to our brothers and sisters. Show us the way of humility and reconciliation. Empower us to refrain from hurtful words, to lay down our weapons, and embrace each other with love and compassion. Teach us how to tell the truth in love and help us to be brave enough to hear when those words are spoken to us. Strengthen our families, our church, our world, and our faith. Through your spirit, unite us to be one in Christ. In his name we pray, Amen.