

Sunday Sermon
August 12, 2018
Ephesians 4:25-5:2, Colossians 3:12-14
“Practice, Practice, Practice”

Introduction

There is an old Peanuts comic strip by Charles Schultz where Charlie Brown is talking with Lucy, the know-it-all girl who loves to pick on him. Charlie says, “Lucy, if children cannot get along, what hope is there for adults?” And Lucy draws back her hand and then pops Charlie Brown on the nose and sends him flipping backwards head over heels. The last frame of the cartoon shows Lucy saying, “I had to hit him. If I let him keep talking like that, who knows what would happen?”

Do we have to keep hitting each other?

I

In this 4th chapter of Ephesians, the writer, listed as Paul, is addressing some conflict in the church at Ephesus. The way it reads, the conflict was old, it was past, but the members of that church could not let it go; they were still upset over some argument they had, some battle, and they were still punishing each other.(1)

Amazon.com currently lists more than forty thousand religious titles that touch on the subject of anger. That number testifies to the level of difficulty we have with this emotion. We know the damage that suppressed and denied anger does, and we know that there is no aggression quite like passive aggression.(2)

This is where our lesson today begins, with a recipe for getting past conflicts and fractured relationships. And the writer begins with a rather odd statement: “Be angry, but do not sin.”

I became angry recently, and I lost my cool. Or perhaps I never really had “my cool” to lose. So I prayed, repenting, asking for guidance. Then this text came up as our lesson for today. And I thought, “Lord what are you saying here?”

The people of Ephesus would have recognized “Be angry, but do not sin” as a quote from Greek philosopher Pythagoras. But Paul Marshall says that when the writer of Ephesians uses it, it is not an imperative; it is an acknowledgement that anger will be present.(3) Apparently Paul believed that anger was an acceptable emotion, even for Christians, but with a qualifier. It was alright to feel passionate about an issue, to argue a point with enthusiasm.

Anger can be a force of change in the world. Often nothing changes until people get angry enough to make a change. It was anger that set enslaved people free. It was anger that got women the right to vote. It was anger that made changes for civil rights. But unbridled anger is a destructive force in the world. Anger must be checked, kept under control.

My husband’s grandmother Mammy used to say, “A temper is a wonderful

thing. A horse that does not have a high temper is not worth having. But you have to bridle, control that temper for it to be any good.”

And when our passion is hurtful to someone else, then we have crossed the line. When our focus is no longer on the issue, but begins to attack the individual, then we have gone too far. And when the argument is over, when the issue has been decided, Paul says we must let it go, and move on.

So to the Pythagorean rule; “Be angry but do not sin,” the writer of Ephesians adds “do not let the sun go down on your anger.” That is to say, at the end of the day, you leave the conflict behind. You forgive and move forward.(4)

II

But I do not have to tell you how difficult that can be. It takes practice. Practice, practice, practice. For Paul, the practice of faith was everything.

There is an old story about golf champion Ben Hogan. After Hogan had won a major tournament, a reporter asked him: “How is it that, under such pressure, you are able to hit so many miraculous shots?” After reflecting for a moment, Hogan answered, “I guess I’m just lucky.” “But, Mr. Hogan,” the reporter came back, “you practice more than any golfer who ever lived.” “Well,” Hogan said, “the more I practice, the luckier I get.”

- The more you practice faithfulness the more faithful you are.
- The more you practice praying the more prayer becomes an integral part of your life.
- The more you practice attendance at church the more church becomes the body of Christ in your life.
- The more you practice a life in Christ the more your life exhibits Christ.(5)
- The more you practice forgiveness, the more you come to experience forgiveness in your life.

III

It has been 28 years since the end of Apartheid in South Africa. In the years following, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and others called their nation to the hard work of forgiveness. They did this first through a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, holding a series of hearings in which perpetrators of violence and victims of that violence came together to share their stories—and bear witness to God’s grace through public acts of contrition and forgiveness.

But of course, Tutu said it was not easy. “Forgiveness is costly,” he said. “It cost God the death of God’s Son. . .

It is not simply ‘forgive and forget,’” he said. Forgiveness is confrontational. It stares the beast in the eye. It names the hurt, the cause of the upset, and then refuses to retaliate. In that way it is restorative, because it seeks not to punish but to heal.

Revenge, on the other hand, does not resolve anything. Revenge leads to a relentless cycle of outrage, reprisal, counter reprisal ad infinitum, as we see played out in the Middle East. So Tutu told the people of South Africa “without forgiveness there is no future.”(6) After the tragedy of 9/11, he offered similar words to our nation, “Ultimately,” he said, “there is no future without forgiveness.”(7)

The Bible is one great story of reconciliation, he said, a story of God’s attempts to recover the community, the harmony, the togetherness, that were God’s intentions in the first place for all of creation.

In their Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Tutu said they wondered whether there might be atrocities so unspeakable in their horror that they should surely qualify for being unforgivable. Yes, there are many of these, such as seeing your children, husband, or wife tortured and killed in front of you. There have been many such atrocities, many, many things that were unspeakable...But can we say unforgivable?

Yes, humanly speaking there must be a threshold for forgiveness. Humanly speaking—but, you see, we are those who have the incredible privilege...to call God “Father”...We who were created in God’s image are...to emulate, to imitate this God, to forgive not only seven times, but seventy times seven, to be as Jesus Christ who as he was being crucified could pray for those nailing him to the Cross...”(8)

Conclusion

Corrie Ten Boom lost her family in the Holocaust. She watched her sister Betsy die in a Nazi concentration camp. She survived and spent the rest of her life working on forgiveness. “Forgiveness,” she came to conclude, “is to set a prisoner free, and to realize the prisoner was you.”

Friends, we love because we first were loved.

We forgive because we have been forgiven.

May we practice, practice, practice.

Notes:

1. Steve Molin, “Had Any Good Church Fights Lately?” sermon on Ephesians 4:25-5:2.
2. Paul V. Marshall, Pastoral Perspective, Ephesians 4:25-5:2, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, p. 326.
3. Ibid.
4. Molin.
5. Gerald Roberts, “Practice, Practice, Practice,” Sermon Central, Aug 10, 2012.
6. Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, “The Spirituality of Reconciliation,” an address at the Washington National Cathedral November 13, 2007, <http://www.cathedral.org>.
7. Quoted in “The Ecumenical Portal,” 2001, <http://www.ecumenical.org>.
8. Bryn Smallwood-Garcia, Congregational Church of Brookfield (UCC), Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 7, 2008.