

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Have you ever enjoyed a conversation that started with the other person saying, "I need to speak the truth to you in love"? Probably not. They usually do not go well. Maybe you've never had a conversation start that way. The phrasing is more prevalent in some circles than others. As a phrase, it is a close cousin to "Bless her heart," in that there is an underlying current of ... nastiness? At the very least, a lack of entirely good will. Speaking the truth in love is important, but just prefacing what you are going to say with that phrase doesn't mean that that is what you are doing. Speaking the truth in love is a difficult thing.

St. Paul is giving the Church at Ephesus – and by extension to us as well – some pretty good advice. We should be able to speak the truth to one another. Of course, there is speaking the truth and then there is just being cruel. As one priest colleague of mine puts it, "As Southerners we would rather be thought hypocritical than unkind." Paul doesn't tell us that we have to say all the truth that we think we know, but when we do talk, speak the truth. There is a place for brutal honesty, but it is usually in the context of a close, personal relationship. And not always even then. Not if you want to stay married at any rate.

Still, the ideal for a church is that we are all so close to one another that we can feel free to be honest with one another. It is, as I say, an ideal. I wouldn't advise anyone to remove *all* of their filters any time soon. Paul acknowledges that as well. "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." If you can't say it in a way that builds the other up, better it be left unsaid. While there may be others, the one definite exception to this is when you are talking to your priest. There is no need to try to find the softest words when you talk to me. I'm going to love you no matter how you say what you have to say. I'm not throwing down a gauntlet; I just mean that you can talk to me freely.

In other cases, it helps if the one hearing what is said strives to hear it in the most charitable way possible. Too many folks are too quick to take offense. Of course, some people are just offensive, bless their hearts. For the others, let us strive to hear with love when they speak with love. As Paul says, we are members of one another. We belong to the same body. We strive for a common goal, the furtherance of God's kingdom. In that kingdom, folks love one another. They seek the best for each other. They try to see the best in each other. Each church is an outpost of the heavenly kingdom. Our task is to make where we are as much like God's kingdom as we possibly can. We can't control others – and we shouldn't try – but we can control ourselves.

Self control doesn't mean being rigid or unfeeling. Paul reminds us of that as well. "Be angry, but do not sin." Being angry is not a sin, but it can lead to sinful behavior. To paraphrase Yoda, anger leads to hate, and hate leads to sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. But what if I get angry

at sunset? Or at night? We are not literalists. Not letting the sun go down on our anger means not to feed our anger. Some folks care and nurture their anger like a child, or that plant from *Little Shop of Horrors*. You get the impression that they think that if they don't feel angry, they won't feel anything at all. Some things should anger us. Oppression and injustice, malice and cruelty, exploitation and theft – these things should make us angry. And they do when they happen to us. They usually do when they happen to someone we know and love. But when you reach the point where, when these things happen to your enemy, you get angry, then you are approaching God's kingdom.

“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.” That is our call. To be imitators of God. To be imitators of Christ, a man who overturned the tables of those cheating the poor in the temple and forgave the men who nailed him to the cross. Let our anger be directed at the right things: not at our enemies but at any injustice. “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Too often, our society teaches us that we should seek revenge and retribution rather than reconciliation. Hating our enemies is much more popular than loving them. Much easier, too. But we are not called to do easy things. We are not called to be like society. We are called to be like Christ. It is a call that can make even simple things more complex. Paul admonishes the Ephesians to give up stealing. On the surface, that might seem akin to a child giving up Brussels sprouts for Lent – not that much of a challenge. I think I can manage to give up robbing liquor stores if that is what it takes. But don't get too comfortable. Read the rest of that sentence: “rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.” Paul provides two categories: thieves and those who share with the needy. There isn't much in between there. Either you are working to share what you have with those who have less, or you are a thief.

Being a good follower of Christ, being a good Christian, takes more than eschewing doing evil. It takes actively doing good. This is not a works righteousness thing. I'm not saying that doing good will earn you salvation. Doing good is how we live into our salvation. God is going to love us no matter what, but God also expects us to repay that love with willful, even joyful, obedience. Rather than rationalizing our selfishness we should be seeking out opportunities to serve. Just like Jesus did.

When it comes down to it, if we find that our Christian walk has become easy we are probably doing it wrong. We must strive never to be satisfied with good enough. Our standard is not our neighbors, but our God. We must be better than just not overtly evil. We are called to be like Christ. May God grant us the grace to answer that call every day. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*