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Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, “ 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,^[a] 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.^[b] **5** ¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us^[c] and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Footnotes

- a. [Ephesians 4:29](#) Other ancient authorities read *building up faith*
- b. [Ephesians 4:32](#) Other ancient authorities read *us*
- c. [Ephesians 5:2](#) Other ancient authorities read *you*

Sermon

I was talking with a couple different folks recently who both mentioned that Ephesians can be a hard book to take. It’s moralistic. It can tell people how to be, unlike the gospels which tell stories about Jesus in a way that give us a little more room to walk around in.

Now, Ephesians is one of the earlier documents from the early church. Ephesians, Galatians, Romans, Colossians, and Corinthians are all letters written in ancient times by ancient people to ancient brand new baby churches. So instead of stories about Jesus, with Ephesians, we’re transported into the story of after Jesus, the story of the early church.

I confessed to one person that, I get it. That sometimes I feel the same way about Ephesians. It *is* an old letter by ancient people to young churches in ancient times. It *can* feel moralistic. And for us, it’s frustrating because in our world the Church doesn’t own the kind of morality that is conveyed in this book. It’s not just a Christian thing to behave well—to be kind, to be loving, to be patient—in community. It’s a human thing. Those are values that people of other faiths and people of no faith may also share. So why does a book like Ephesians—and what it says—matter? In other words, so what?

When Ephesians frustrates me, the fact that it’s a window into the early church is what pulls me in. Across eons and cultures, some of it is so familiar.

People in community bicker, they disagree about what community is about. They struggle with which way is better, they don't always appreciate one another's gifts. They grapple with cultural norms that butt heads with church values. I like that part of Ephesians. It's so human, isn't it? It makes the context and the people not seem so far from our people and contexts today.

And that's just it, isn't it? We live in a world where we have to grapple with *how we live* with one another. And our world is increasingly connected and populated. We have to figure out how to be.

We're seeing that in real time with the pandemic, aren't we? Comedian Kevin Fredericks recently tweeted, "beating a pandemic is a group project. This is why I always hated group projects."¹ Ephesians matters because we are figuring out how we will be. How we will live. How we will go forward—together—whether we like it or not. How we will be. How we will live: in the face of a pandemic, in the face of a climate crisis in the face of Line 3, in the face of the truths about racism in our nation, in the face of our own situations, and trauma, and grief.

How we will be? How we choose to interact matters, maybe more than it's ever mattered, in our lives at least. Ephesians can guide us on this great experiment of what's next in the face of challenge. And really, it's a question of how we will love. Hear that again. It's about how we will love. How we will love one another and the world.

Ephesians as a whole leans on two primary metaphors: first, that the world is a household and that Christ is the leader; and second, that we are all part of the body of Christ. Both metaphors of the household and the body insist that we are in community—and that all of us are to work towards God's goal—to overcome division, to include, and to heal the wounds of the world.²

Wherever walls exist, the writer of Ephesians, as a whole, wants readers to know that the work of the church, indeed the *calling* of the church is to tear the walls down, as "the political, economic, social, and psychological structures and practices that enforce segregation" between people. Ephesians talks a lot about Jews and Gentiles, but today it could be any number of things: descendants of white European colonizers and people of the global majority, Palestinian and Israeli, you name it, the list goes on.

Ephesians calls for the end to oppression in every form—and it's not just talking about "a truce in which adversaries tolerate each other; it is a vision." As

¹ Kevin Fredericks, <https://twitter.com/kevonstage/status/1280158700624211970?lang=en>

² Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review/issues/fall-2009/ambassadors-chains-evangelizing-powers>

one scholar said, Ephesians is a vision “that seeks to abolish the deepest justifications for enmity [hostility and hate]. That, [they assert,] is the only peacemaking that endures.”³

The overall idea of Ephesians isn’t a shallow peace, its one that takes work and time. It’s a peace that requires people to be vulnerable. And it’s a peace that is grounded in love. You could read many parts of the book that describe this way of being but it’s also right here in our text today: “let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another,” let go of all bitterness “and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love,” the writer of Ephesians says. These aren’t just nice words. These are words that require us growing in maturity and valuing the greater whole.

Ephesians imagines a world where “the power of nonviolent love has undone the love of power.” Ephesians imagines a world where “peace has been declared, not as a sentimental absence of conflict,” but as an intentional laying down of that which divides us, for the purpose of reconciliation.⁴ It imagines that world, paints complex word images of it, then it calls people to *do* that work with those visions in mind.

Now maybe that all seems well and good but Ephesians has been put into action. Ephesians was relied upon heavily by members of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, who knew that Ephesians is grounded in nonviolent love, in ending oppression, and in peace for all people.

Late Civil Rights Leader and Congressman John Lewis had a beautiful conversation with Krista Tippett several years ago. It was rebroadcast around the time of his death last year. In the interviews, Lewis said to Tippett, “It’s not something most people think about, but that what most people don’t realize is that the Civil Rights movement was founded deeply in religious moral convictions.”

Lewis and other leaders worked, you see, trained, to spiritually confront themselves in order to do the work they did. They grounded themselves, he said, in deep trust and faith. Lewis and other leaders prepared themselves in heart and mind to do the nonviolent resistance that they did. They role played what their nonviolent resistance might look like. Lewis said that they had to make peace with themselves, first, so that they could look the people they were resisting in the eye. So that if and when they were beaten, they could imagine the people hurting

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

them as the innocent children they once were, not adults who had learned to hate.

Of that training, that preparation, John Lewis told Krista Tippett, “you have to grow. It’s just not something that is natural. You have to be taught the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence. And in the religious sense, in the moral sense, you can say in the bosom of every human being, there is a spark of the divine. So you don’t have a right as a human to abuse that spark of the divine in your fellow human being.”⁵

Our Scripture today says that too: “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.” It’s not saying don’t be angry or even the literal, “don’t go to bed angry.” Our scripture is saying its normal to be angry, but don’t let your anger make you become bitter. Be angry. John Lewis and other leaders of the movement were angry, and rightly so. But don’t let that anger lead to abusing the spark of the divine in others. As Rev. Dr. King said, “hate is too heavy a burden to bear.”⁶

If we are angry, Ephesians tells us, we can use it for something, use it for the sake of a better world for everyone. Because we are members of one another. Because we belong to one another. We are members of the same body, of the same household.

This is where Ephesians shows us love in action; shows us how we can be. The Civil Rights movement and its leaders—indeed the leaders today—are a nearer example of love in action. Whether or not they were Christians does not matter as much as we can see in them what our scripture is talking about. Our scripture today says we can be “imitators of Christ.” Those values, lived out, are living out Christ’s values. This is where the rubber meets the road, friends, how we will be in this conflicted, beautiful, crisis-ridden world.

Perhaps imitating Christ looks like this. Hear John Lewis’ words again: “When we were sitting in, it was love in action. When we went on the freedom ride, it was love in action. The march from Selma to Montgomery was love in action. We do it not simply because it’s the right thing to do, but it’s love in action...and so we have to move our feet.”

⁵ John Lewis and Krista Tippett, <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-lewis-love-in-action/#transcript>, 2013, accessed 2021.

⁶ Ibid.

My friends our scripture today, indeed the entire book of Ephesians centers on the question of “how, then, shall we live?” It mattered 2,000 years ago. We know it still matters now. Look at where we are. How will we choose to be? How will we choose to show up? What will *our* love in action look like?

Let’s use these words from Wendell Berry as our prayer, as we go into the world this week and every week after. I invite you into a spirit of prayer. Wendell Berry wrote:

"I know that I have life
only insofar as I have love.
I have no love
except it come from Thee.
Help me, please, to carry
this candle against the wind."⁷ Amen.

And amen.

⁷ *Leavings* (2012), Wendell Berry's poem-prayer