

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, August 8, 2021
11th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 19/Proper 14/Year B
First Reading: 1 Kings 19:4-8
Second Reading: Ephesians 4:25-5:2
Gospel Reading: John 6:35, 41-51
Sermon Title: “Instructions for the Disciple – Part 2”

Theme

Christians are called to be imitators of God. This does not mean Christians are perfect. Rather, the Spirit is at work in our lives so that our actions and attitudes genuinely reflect the love and forgiveness we have received through Christ and his death.

Text

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

Sermon

You may recall that last week we had a guest preacher, the Rev. Dr. Robert Duffett. True story: I had been here probably two years before I really knew who he was. Oh, I'd been introduced. I knew he was an academician and university president in the Baptist tradition. I just didn't know that he was also an ordained Baptist minister and that the university he was president of also had a seminary where among his duties he taught preaching! I am glad I did not know that about him those first couple of years.

I always enjoy hearing Dr. Duffett preach and last weekend was no exception. We had spoken earlier in the week and he told me he wanted to preach on the Ephesians 4 text and asked my opinion. The reason for his asking was because, as he read that text, it spoke directly to the diversity of thought and action in our culture today. He wanted my opinion because I think he feared as a visiting preacher he would come off as a seagull. A seagull is a metaphor for a person who flies in, drops some stuff off, and then flies away. In this case, I would be left to clean up whatever mess he made if he offended one side or the other. But as you may recall, not only did he do a masterful job of walking that tightrope, in his conclusion he said we are supposed to speak the truth in love and lead lives worthy of our calling.

My mom, who watches our worship services several times a week said, "Wow, now he's a good preacher!" Thanks, Mom! And, "He's really demonstrative!" Well, I was impressed too, so this week and over the next two weeks, I will be preaching a short series on the Readings from Ephesians, and wave my arms a lot.

Though the Letter to the Ephesians is attributed to Paul, most biblical scholars agree that the letter is pseudonymous – meaning not written by the authentic Paul. But before you let that upset you, let me tell you that in a culture and time when most written texts were communicated orally, Paul probably did write a letter to the Ephesians but over time the contents have been massaged to the point that some of the traditional characteristics of Paul's writings are absent. So for our purposes today and the next couple of weeks, I will refer to the author as simply, *the author*.

The Christian community at Ephesus was made up of converts from other pagan religions. So when the author began this passage by writing, "So then, putting away falsehood," he was reminding the Ephesians, formerly pagan, then Christian, that

they can no longer "live as the Gentiles live." Again, in Jewish thought, there are two kinds of people: Jews and everybody else, being the Gentiles. The Ephesians, who were formerly ignorant Gentiles, did not know the saving truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ. But since their confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, they must put away their pagan ways and walk in the ways of their Lord Jesus.

Now the rest of the passage will be easy to preach because it is essentially one admonition after another:

²⁶let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

This verse is an extension of Dr. Duffett's teaching last week. In it the author wrote that we are to *speak the truth in love* ²*with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,* ³*making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* Remember that? Dr. Duffett taught that that doesn't mean that we as members of this church have to agree on everything, but we do have to respect one another and hear one another, and even fight for those things that are worth fighting for. But don't get the fight confused with the person.

Do you remember that we used to have a little house out front that we rented to a Nationwide agent? We are not good landlords and the structure had gotten to the point that Council needed direction from you, the congregation. So Council brought four scenarios before you to consider. It turned out that the decision to demolish the house and get out of the landlord business was a quick unanimous decision, but what if one or a few people felt passionate that one of the other scenarios was best? We as the congregation should have respectfully heard their arguments, but it would have still come down to a vote where the majority vote won the day. But after the vote, we are still members of one another, worshiping and serving the one Lord Jesus Christ.

²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil.

Notice that the author does not say that anger is a sin – it is not! He wrote, be angry, just don't let your anger cause you to sin. You are probably aware that violent crime in the city of Youngstown has been high lately. I suppose the people

involved in those crimes get so angry about something that they are willing to harm and even kill another person. When an offended person gets so angry at another offending person that the offended is willing to sin against the offender by harming them, the offended is *making room for the devil* as the author wrote.

You are probably as confused by this as I am. The offender is often killed, and the offended, who is now an offender himself, usually gets caught and will go to jail for a long time. The families of both parties are devastated. But anger is not the problem. Letting it fester can be, and responding to it badly is making room for the devil to encourage bad behavior.

²⁸Thieves 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.

I couldn't find anything in my commentaries that explains why the author brought up thieves within the Ephesian fellowship. Were there some? I don't know. I wonder how the author would know that. Well, no matter, the author is opposed to any kind of dishonest living off of others. Rather, he wrote that all should make an honest living *so that* resources can be shared with others who are not as well off.

Personally, Carol and I have a good standard of living, and one of the many blessings of our lives is that we have enough to be generous. Zion gets our tithes, but we enjoy supporting several other organizations that are important to us as well.

²⁹Let 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.

So let me just say that personally, I have found that the last six years or so have not advanced this admonition in our culture. On the contrary, I think things have gotten worse. The author wrote that Christians are supposed to be above the godless and immoral rhetoric of the culture. Let us remember that we are Christians first and above all else, and we should let Jesus be our example and behave at all times as if he is in the room. Lift up others instead of put them down. Build up others instead of tear them down. I doubt you will win an election, but then whoever said our elected leaders are our models of Christian behavior?

³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

To *not grieve the Holy Spirit* is similar to *not making room for the devil*. My wife the professional educator is always reminding me that words matter and that we should always frame our language positively. The author never met Carol, because had he, he might have said something like, "Remember you are baptized and sealed with the cross of Christ. Therefore take advantage of every opportunity to bring glory to the Holy Spirit of God."

³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,

This verse and the next are bookends. In verse 31 the author listed behavior that is beneath the Christian. And verse 32 are behaviors that are the better choices the Christian should make.

³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

If these behaviors are our operating system, so to speak, then when we interact with others out of these behaviors we have left no room for "bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice."

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

The author concluded this passage with a very clear and concise conclusion that even a hack preacher like me, Mother, can't miss. He wrote,

^{5:1}Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Imitators of God? How can we do that when we can't even see or know God? I am so glad you asked. Because Jesus Christ our Lord said

John 14:9 "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

In other words, be imitators of Christ, and you do know him, or can know him, through your own spiritual disciplines of worship, devotions, Bible study and meditation, and so on.

The author referred to his readers as "beloved children," but that is not permission to act like children. But like children, we need to understand our position in our relationship with God. God is our Heavenly Father and we are his children, and just like in human families, parents are to raise their children to know right from wrong. So do not be offended by this teaching from Holy Scripture. It is the way we become better disciples, grow in the likeness of Christ, and that pleases God.

The author concluded this passage by writing:

²live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

To "live in love" is to nurture every relationship from your spouse and children, to coworker and neighbor. But more than that, it even means to nurture relationships with others who are not like us, don't look like us, don't appear to share our same value systems, and even people we do not yet know. We have to be careful, but we need to come to relationships with the expectation of friendship instead of being paranoid that everyone intends to do us harm.

If we do all or any of what we have discussed today, or if we just make some inroads toward change, our effort to be imitators of Christ will rise up to God as our fragrant offering and sacrifice.

Prayer

Lord God, if we really thought about it, we want to please you more than anything. Allow this teaching to ruminate in our minds so that we take it to heart and use it to model our behavior. Forgive us when we fail, and let our efforts to please you, please you. We pray this in the name of our model for godly living, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen