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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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1 Kings 19:4–8, Psalm 34:1–8, Ephesians 4:25—5:2, John 6:35, 41–51
St. Paul on Relationships

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from our Epistle Lesson, from Ephesians Chapters Four and Five. St. Paul is writing about the manner in which we should deal with one another. He writes this:

³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. ^{5:1}Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ²And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us... (Ephesians 4:31-5:2, RSV)

In Martin Luther's *Large Catechism*, Luther uses the phrase "our nearest neighbor." He means our spouse. He points out that the holy commandments of God are admirably arranged in such a way that the Fifth Commandment - Thou shalt not kill - teaches us to count life precious, and the Sixth Commandment - Thou shalt not commit adultery - goes on to speak of our *nearest* neighbor, our spouse:

The following commandments are easily understood from the preceding one, for they all teach us to guard against harming our neighbor in any way. They are admirably arranged. First they deal with the person of our neighbors. Then they go on to speak of the person nearest to them, the most important thing to them after their own life, namely, their spouse, who is one flesh and blood with them. (*Large Catechism*, "The Sixth Commandment," Kolb-Wengert)

In this sermon about interpersonal relationships, I especially have those relationships in mind which mean the world to us: our marriages and children and friendships. So, I hope this will be a practical sermon -- perhaps even a romantic sermon -- a sermon meant to help us in the life of day-to-day love.

I am moved to discuss romance by a great line in St. John Chrysostom's homily on this passage. He summed up his argument with these words:

Be a lover then of love; for by this art thou saved...

Let me begin by acknowledging that in this morning's passage, St. Paul has a larger topic in mind than romance. He is speaking of all kinds of interpersonal dealings between Christians. This includes marriage, but also friendships, business relationships, coffee hour conversations, working together on Church Council or Board of Trustees or Board of Deacons, the tone of our letters or emails to one another, ecumenical relationships between churches, and so. *Everywhere*, St. Paul wants love to prevail in our dealings with one another.

But I am especially bearing romance in mind as I work with this morning's text because it is in our dealings with one another in day-to-day life in our marriages or in those friendships most dear to us that love gets its most substantial test. For example, if some member of the church annoys you, then, as far as lies possible with you, you can seek to live peaceably with that one, but by and large, you can minimize your dealings with that one. You can shy away from that one. You can be polite to that one, you can pray for that one, and you can help that one if it seems right to you, but you are free to follow your own path, apart from that one. Not so in our marriages or in our engagements to be married or in those friendships that mean so much to us in life. There, there is need for the kind of apostolic exhortations we read about in this morning's text. It is in romance that we should seek to "be a lover of love."

And whatever is said of love in day-by-day marriage can then carry over into other kinds of relationships too, including those relationships that are more sporadic and for which we can lay our head down on the pillow at night and forget about them.

So, about St. Paul's exhortations, you will notice that they are phrased both in the negative and in the positive. Negatively, he wants us to tame the beast of anger and cutting words in our relationships. Positively, he wants us to "walk in love." These, then, are the two parts of the sermon: the negative and the positive.

A PRELUDE ON THE TRUTH

But before turning to St. Paul's negative and positive exhortations, let me begin with a prelude on truth. I think that our relationships should be based not only on mutual goodwill and the desire for peace, but also on truth. For what good is peace and quiet in a relationship if it is purchased at the price of deceit?

So, let me back up a little bit in Ephesians Chapter 4 and lift up another one of St. Paul's great lines. He urges us to "speak the truth in love":

¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.
(Ephesians 4:15-16, NRSV)

Speak the truth in love, but speak it!

I think it is a great thing for us to be known as a person of truth. And we should want our beloved to think of us that way too. Let your yea be yea, and your nay, nay, urges St. James:

¹²But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation. (James 5:12, KJV)

This does not mean that you cannot hold your tongue and keep your own counsel sometimes, especially if you feel it wise to withdraw for a little while in order to collect your thoughts. Even Jesus did not reveal himself fully to everyone because he judged it would not be good to do so:

²³Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. ²⁴But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, ²⁵And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man. (John 2:23-25, KJV)

Likewise, before Pilate, Jesus tended to hold his tongue in face of false accusations:

¹⁴And he answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly. (Matthew 27:14, KJV)

But when Jesus did speak, he spoke truthfully. I cannot recall a story about Jesus in which he ever tried to deceive someone.

So in our relationships, let us be people of truth. When we speak with one another or with our children, do not use language as a means of manipulation. Do not say, "I will do such-and-such," but then not do it. Instead, let your word be rock solid. When you speak, let people trust that you are speaking the truth.

FIRST, THE NEGATIVE

So, with that little discourse on truth as a prelude, let's turn to St. Paul's negative exhortations. Let's look at St. Paul's appeal that we avoid hurting one another in our relationships.

His discussion begins with an interesting distinction concerning anger:

²⁶Be angry but do not sin... (Ephesians 4:26, RSV)

The interesting thing about this for me is that it would have sounded even more noble if St. Paul had said simply, “Be not angry one with another.” That would be great! - to know no anger anymore. But those peaceful days lie off in the future, in heaven, when the Holy Spirit has perfected us and removed the impulse of anger from us. Till then, we seem to always struggle with anger. So, St. Paul acknowledges this. He says “Be angry.” Go ahead, be angry. He acknowledges that we are neither sticks nor stones, but passionate beings, fully capable of anger. Certainly we should control and try to cool our anger, lest it blaze forth and ruin everything, but the apostle does not forbid anger. He simply asks that our anger not be our undoing or the undoing of our marriages. “Be angry, but do not sin.”

In general, I am not a fan of blow-ups in a marriage. I am not the most observant guy in the world and so maybe I missed things when I was a boy, but I simply do not recall any blow-ups between my parents, ever. And I bet our boys could say the same thing about Carol and me: that they just don’t recall any blow-ups between us. I don’t recall any. Chaotic, hurtful exchanges can be forgiven, but the mending of the hearts can take a good, long time. Life doesn’t need to be that way. We do not need to yield to blow-ups in our relationships.

I am not talking now about the volume of the discourse in marriage. Some relationships are simply loud. The partners are both articulate and know how to cut loose in the words. Vast and loud is the flow of them. But such relationships need not be bitter. In fact, they can be fun, like the marriage of Ralph and Alice Kramden, played by Jackie Gleason and Audrey Meadows in *The Honeymooners*. And going the other way around, some relationships can be soft and quiet, but mean. So, I am not talking about the volume of the discourse, but rather, the spirit of it:

³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice... (Ephesians 4:31, RSV)

Flee from cutting words toward one another. If you are angry, seek to calm down as soon as you can. Remember the apostolic appeal about the sunset:

...do not let the sun go down on your anger,

Try not to build up a history of unresolved arguments. The problem with letting anger continue after sunset is that the next day, that anger might well grow. If you have not reached reconciliation the night before, then you might misread the words of the day. You might find offense where none was meant, and things go from bad to worse.

Slow down your arguments by working hard at listening to one another, to drink in what is being said, before framing an answer that might not really be on target.

And remember that your beloved has been entrusted to you by God. You hope to inherit beatitude together someday. And do not dishonor the mouth you use to receive the Blessed Sacrament by using that mouth to curse your beloved, for your beloved is also beloved of the Lord.

So, those are some beginning thoughts on the negative. Flee from hurting one another in your relationships.

POSITIVELY

And put in the positive, St. Paul's exhortations about our relationships are very lovely:

³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. ^{5:1}Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ²And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...

That is a high, high ideal St. Paul sets before us: "Therefore be imitators of God." If we be such imitators, then we will be like sun shining on both the good and the bad. We will smile toward our beloved in good times and in bad. We will be tenderhearted, so that the cry of the Lord toward Israel will find its echo in our own hearts:

⁸How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboiim! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. ⁹I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy. (Hosea 11:8-9, RSV)

And if we be imitators of God, then we will stand ready to forgive our beloved. For did not Jesus pray for the forgiveness even of those who tormented him? "Father, forgive..."

And if we be imitators of God, then we will be tenderhearted and kind toward one another, for so is our Maker toward us. There is no shadow of meanness in our God, no variation away from the path of love toward us.

And if we be not able to love in such divine manner, then as far as lies possible in you, seek such love, following the pattern of our Master who loved all the way to the surrendering of his life and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.