

**A sermon preached on August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018 based upon Ephesians 4:25-5:2 entitled “Guidance for Staying on the Straight and Narrow.”**

In his letters, the apostle Paul typically spends the first portion proclaiming the Gospel, the good news of how we have been saved by the overflowing grace revealed in Christ Jesus, and then the second half talking about the new life we should be leading as a people **baptized** into the body of Christ.

In the words Bob just read Paul twice speaks of “*putting away*” stuff: **“Put away falsehood... (and) all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice...”**

These “put away” references are baptism talk – apparently referencing the actual practice of baptism in those days. People would put away – that is, strip away – their old dirty clothes as symbols of their old selves, and “put on” the bleached white robes of the saints of God.

This reminded me of a scene from one of my favorite movies, a comedy called “*O Brother Where Art Thou.*” The movie takes place in Mississippi during the Great Depression. George Clooney plays Ulysses Everett McGill, a smooth-talking con man who along his two sidekicks Pete and Delmar escape from a chain gang, after which they spend the rest of the movie in flight from the police and in pursuit of a treasure conjured up in Everett’s imagination.

It is a rather *irreverent* comedy, but it has this one scene in which holiness suddenly appears. Everett returns to their temporary hiding place in the woods having made a trip into town in a failed attempt to acquire his favorite hair gel and a fix for the broken transmission on their car.

As Pete and Delmar chow down on some roasted gopher Everett describes the plan he has hatched to purchase a new car, showing the boys a newly stolen gold watch. When Pete realizes that Everett has stolen the watch from his kin, he is suddenly overcome with a serious case of moral indignation even though, as Everett points out the kin had just tried to turn them into the police.

Pete’s outrage however is suddenly interrupted as they suddenly discover themselves to be surrounded by processions of singing white robed pilgrims streaming down to the river to be baptized by a preacher, and Delmar, overwhelmed by the holiness all around him is overtaken by a longing for a new life in Christ. He runs out into the water, cutting in front of the line to have himself dunked by the preacher.

He comes forth happily declaring how all his sins have been forgiven and it’s “*the straight and narrow*” for him from here on in. “*Come on in boys*” he says to Everett and Peter, “*the water is fine.*”

So, how do we as Pete said, follow “*the straight and narrow*” of the new life in Christ? In this world that often seems increasingly to have lost its way, Paul provides some guidance.

**“So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.”**

Telling falsehoods has become practically standard practice in the highest positions of power in our country, but to some extent the deceit of our leaders is an expression of a culture where dishonesty often seems to have become the norm.

A lot of the false hoods aren't out and out lies – they're misleading statements that leave out important truths for the purpose of deception. To some degree we all tell such falsehoods and our relationships suffer for it – we lose sight of the truth as Paul puts it that we truly are “*members of one another*.” The connection is lost as our capacity to trust one another is lost.

What would it mean for us to make a renewed commitment to choosing our words carefully in order to stay close to the truth?

One of the places that the temptation to play fast and loose with the truth arises is when anger overtakes us. And so Paul says,

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

Paul acknowledges that anger is unavoidable and sometimes appropriate when we find ourselves dealing with true injustice. But anger, Paul says can be dangerous. Notice what we do with truth when we get angry: We get careless with our words. We make sweeping generalizations. We leave out significant truths in an attempt to defeat the person who in the moment of our rage is seen to be our enemy: “You're always trying to undermine me!” Always? Always? *Sometimes* is not *always* and it is an important distinction.

When we're angry we also tend to be dishonest regarding ourselves. We fail to own up to our contribution to what's gone wrong – our capacity to do the very thing that caused us to lash out.

There are two different destructive ways to relate to anger. The **first** is to be something of an *anger addict*, regularly lashing out at others -- getting an adrenalin rush from the momentary feelings of invincibility we get as we watch others cower.

But just like an alcoholic after a drinking binge, when take this path afterwards we are left feeling all the worse for it.

For many of us though our tendency is to move in the opposite direction with our anger – one that in certain ways can be worse. We “*let the sun go down on our anger*” – which is to say we hold onto it, refusing to release it.

As psychologists are fond of saying, we become “*passive aggressive*.” Instead of directly addressing the person who we feel has wronged us, we gripe to others in an attempt to persuade them to join our conspiracy of unexpressed anger. As our anger gets buried inside we slowly, quietly withdraw -- allowing ourselves to enter as Paul says the toxic state of “bitterness.”

It kills the soul, the capacity to love.

What if when we find anger rising up within us we were to pause, collect ourselves and then as Paul says elsewhere “*speak the truth in love*” taking care to name clearly and precisely the actions that have led us to feel angry.

A practical guideline is to focus on the concrete behaviors we’re reacting to and avoid wholesale condemnations of the other person’s very being. Saying things like “*You’re such a jerk!*” don’t tend to be very helpful.

Speak with precision about the particular actions taken by the other and the specific emotions evoked within us in response: “*When you do such and such, I feel such and such.*”

Although anger can arise quickly usually it isn’t our deepest emotion, though it often seems like the easiest emotion to acknowledge. What we may really be feeling is a sense of being wounded -- but it can take some *vulnerability* to acknowledge this.

If, however we are willing to risk such vulnerability – to say, “*It really hurts me when you do such and such*” – we will find people far less likely responding with walls of defensiveness.

**“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.”**

Think of what our society would look like without all the thievery that occurs – not only by the poor Petes and Delmars of this world but also by the rich and powerful who make off with billions.

But there are two other things Paul is saying here. First, the value of hard work – of doing a good job. Sarah and I listened to a “This American Life” podcast about this brave young Hispanic woman named LaDonna who worked for a major contractor that provided security at airports and the institutional humiliations and harassment she encountered there.

It became clear that advancement in the company wasn’t based on putting in a lot of hard work -- it was about playing the system – getting on the right side of people above you –people who themselves weren’t working particularly hard. People routinely put out as little effort as possible and it shocked her.

I was struck by what LaDonna said: “*We’re ‘at work.’ For me being ‘at work’ is a little like going to church. You put forth your best self.*”

Don’t be lazy. Don’t be a loafer. Don’t be a drain on your community if you have the capacity to contribute.

But notice that Paul also acknowledges there truly are a lot of people in this world who are poor by no fault of their own, and one of our motivations for working hard to earn money should be that living frugally we will have money to give to people less fortunate than ourselves.

**”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.”**

Paul’s saying “*don’t gossip, don’t malign, don’t be the person who pours cold water and every new idea.*” But he’s saying more than this: He’s calling attention to the opportunities we too often miss to speak words that “build up” – words as Paul so beautifully puts it that “*give grace to those who hear.*”

These are our *sins of omission* – the opportunities we let pass in which we could have spoken gracious words but chose not to.

There are lots of ways to speak such words. One of the ways that came to mind for me was one that my dear friend David Turner is so good at: words of affirmation and praise regarding something positive somebody has done.

It’s so easy to do, but too often something holds us back from saying,

“*Hey, that was a very thoughtful thing you did for so and so.*”

“*I noticed how hard you worked on preparing that dinner.*”

words of simple affirmation that encourage a person to keep on the path. The chaplains who work with Hospice say there are some basic things that people who are dying and those who are related to person who are dying need to say to one another -- things like...

“*Thank you for being a part of my life.*”

“*I love you.*”

“*I forgive you.*”

“*Will you forgive me?*”

These are words that “*give grace.*” To walk with Jesus means not waiting till somebody’s on their death bed to say such things.

Finally, “**be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.**”

Kindness, yes. Tenderheartedness, rather than hard-heartedness. And forgiveness. Nothing quite so defines what it means to walk with the way of Jesus as forgiveness – the choice **not** to keep a *ledger sheet* in our head of wrongs committed and what we think is owed us.

A willingness to forgive makes all kinds of wonderful things possible. There was a beautiful story in the news this week of a former Ku Klux Klansman who marched with hatred in his heart in Charlottesville a year ago.

In the year sense, he has been befriended by a black pastor who reached out to him, leading him to embrace the Gospel. There is a picture of him wearing a white robe hand in hand with the pastor leading him into the waters of baptism.

The Pastor's mostly African American congregation welcomed him with open arms, forgiving his past sins of racism.

But offering forgiveness is hard. The capacity to do so arises from the recognition that there is much within all of us that can seem hard to love – that needs forgiveness. Sometimes this involves actual deeds we've committed, but often times it's thoughts that – if not for the grace of God – could easily have been acted out destructively.

When we ponder the great mystery that God knows all the dark deeds we have done and all the darkness that lies within and still loves us unconditionally we discover the grace that allows us to love and forgive others.

We're going to finish up this morning with a skit performed by some of our young people. The skit is entitled, "Unconditional Love."