

SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 4:1-3, 25-32

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. 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. 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. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

SERMON: "Living in Love" The Rev. Brent Damrow

She is nothing short of amazing. She preaches her sermons with her whole body, and her soul, too. She offers communion in a way that time stops, and you feel somehow as if you really are enjoying a sumptuous feast laid out before you. The music that she picks for every service are always hymns you know by heart. But I have to be honest. The way that Liz Myer Boulton starts every single service that she leads is the way that Paul begins here. And it makes all those other elements, all those ways she is being thoughtful and intentional come to life in much deeper ways, it changes everything. And it can change us, too.

You see, she starts worship, almost always, in the way we did this morning. In fact, before doing anything else, she welcomes people into a time of confession. Because she reminds people that, while we as people of faith are called to be many things in this world, chief among them, she says, is that we are called to be truth tellers. She says as we gather, take all those other things that you're carrying with you and put them away -- those ideas or ideals of who or what we think we should be, those half truths, those innocent lies that we tell ourselves or each other to feel better - - so that we might fully be present, to ourselves, to God, to each other. For without truth, Paul writes and Liz preaches and the faithful of the ages proclaim, without truth authentic community and "being church" can't happen. This lofty enterprise of us gathering together to be God's love, without truth it is doomed to fail, no matter how glorious the music, no matter how satisfying the food, or even how stimulating any sermon might be.

The themes of Paul's letter to the Ephesians (one of my favorite letters) are so similar to many of his other letters. But this letter, also though, is very different from many of them. Unlike the other letters, this one wasn't written to a particular church in a particular time, facing a particular question. Instead, it was written to all the churches of Ephesus. It was meant to be a letter that would be passed around. It was meant to be something that would engage anyone who is thinking about being church together, to give them something to think about, something to feast on. And what we have seen is that it's not just the Ephesians who have leaned on this letter. Almost all the theological heavyweights have, too. Aquinas loved it. Luther wrote extensively about it. Calvin was maybe even a little obsessed with it.

Which leads me to believe that there is absolutely something in this letter to the Ephesians that is here for us in this particular moment. We are in one of those liminal spaces. I love it: the

numbers gathering back on this lawn week after week are growing. Sunday school is resuming. We are coming back together after having spent so long apart. And yet we are also in this interesting moment of a couple weeks before you and I both get a time of sabbatical, a time of rest and reflection, a time of rest and rejuvenation, a time of reconnection. And I can't think of a better text than this one for us to chew on, to think about, and for it to linger. As with so many of Paul's writings, too often texts like this become a checklist of things for us to do. Lofty ideals for us to strive for, or maybe even a measuring stick as to whether or not we are doing alright.

But this is not some checklist of what we have to attain. It is less a final destination for you or for me. But rather, what Paul lays out is the roadmap, the way, the means by which we become church, and get to wherever it is we're going. For despite Paul's zealousness – he was a fanatic for perfection – Paul would have loved Liz Myer Boulton, because Paul was a truth teller. Paul, even though he called on us to live the fullness of life, knows that life is never fully perfect. It's never completely realized. Instead, life is always becoming. And Paul lays out clearly for us in this letter to the Ephesians that truth and forgiveness are necessary partners in the endeavor of life. And Paul would maintain not just because he tells us so, but because God shows us so through the life of Christ. And God shows us in the tiny miracles of life every day.

One of Paul's greatest gifts to me is how he understands how this idea of truth and forgiveness work. That forgiveness is not just letting go or wiping the slate clean, because God knows in that kind of model the slate is going to get dirty again. To just let something go and pretend that all is suddenly going to be right is a recipe for frustration and failure. But Paul understands that when we forgive as God forgives, in kindness and with tender hearts, that we go beyond simply erasing those hurts and failures, and instead that in the act of forgiveness we actually move toward and into something. That in that act of lovingkindness which results in peaceful harmony, we're given and get to take some of what yet might be the goodness for which we are all created. In the act of being vulnerable enough to share truth and recognize failure and offer reconciliation, there is new beginning. Not just because of what we let go of, but more importantly because of the new thing that we may cling to. Not just the pain or hurt or disappointment going away, but the joy of a new relationship and new ways. Not just getting rid of the disagreement that brought stress to us, but finding new reasons to agree, to join, to move.

In the middle of this passage is something that I love, because it's fundamentally the way Paul approaches everyone in his letters. It is always this gentle nudging. It is not this punishment oriented approach, but rather an understanding and fixing kind of approach. Right there in the middle, did you catch it? There is that reference to thieves. And what do thieves have to do? Stop thieving. And what's our job in it? Well, partly to figure out why they are. Part of it is because there is an assumption that each and every one of us is made in God's own image, that we are doing the best we can with what we've got. Naturally, if one of us would do something other than thieving to contribute to society, to engage our passions, of course we would, wouldn't we? And yet something has led a person down a path. Something is getting in the way of allowing that person who is walking with us to be fully among us. Maybe we need to not just look at that person and what's leading to it, but look at our own lives and how we've created a community in which that sort of thing is necessary.

Notice Paul doesn't write that their thieving is sending them to hell or bringing on some kind of punishment. But more, that we have failed together to create the kind of paradise, the kind of flourishing life that lets everyone fully participate. Less a need to hold them accountable, and more a desire to restore connection and purpose.

And second, what draws me to this part about thieving is that the beauty of the created order of Eden, of Paradise, of the New Jerusalem, the way that Jesus showed us to live is all about achieving the kind of flourishing where everyone can share. Remember is says give them something to do so they can contribute to the needy. Notice that it is to engage them so that they are fully a part of the community, so that we can all look out for and care for each other.

As I look out across this lawn, as I look into the camera for online services, as I text with you and talk with you on the phone, I know this: that we have all been through a storm these last couple of years. And yet, I also know that we've all been in very different boats. Sometimes we've been in tugboats, strong and able to help. Sometimes we've been merely on a plank of wood, hanging on for dear life. Sometimes we have been barges, finding great peace or identity in lives made simpler or more beautiful. But sometimes, it has felt like we're on a life raft, careening, overwhelmed in our isolation and our list of responsibilities. I know this as I look out at each of you, and as I think about myself: sometimes we have been our best self, and sometimes we have come up a bit short.

So what Paul says we must do is search in tenderhearted forgiveness to find all the boats out there that are either drifting or already adrift, whether they got that way by some unfortunate choice they made or by circumstances that none of us were prepared for. We are called to recognize our journeys, and then to tie our boats together in real ways, in honest ways, ways that let go of what has been, and already invites us into newer, deeper and better ways of shared life with God and each other, too. Bind ourselves in peace to float in the direction of goodness, or simply help each other stay afloat in times of tumult, difficulty or distress. Truth, honesty, forgiveness, mutual caring. Friends, those are critical at any moment, but especially in this time as we look back to where we've been, and forward to where we might yet go.

We are indeed in a great liminal space of what has been and what will be. And this time of approaching sabbatical is a great time to be honest with each other and with our church, about what this endeavor of church is for, and how it shows up in the ways we relate to one another, and the ways we relate to our world.

This passage doesn't tell us anything that we need to be, but instead *how* we need to be, that we might find our direction of how we call and serve one another. And I can tell you this: One thing I know I'm going to be doing in my sabbatical – and I invite you to do it with me – I call it the 4:29 challenge. That is chapter 4, verse 29. Here's what I want you to do. I want you to take that verse and print it on a piece of paper. I want you to put it on your bathroom mirror so that you see it in the beginning of the day and at the end of the night.

And what is Ephesians 4:29? Let nothing come out of your mouth that isn't meant for the glory of God or for the upbuilding of one another. Let nothing come out of your mouth that isn't designed to help and uplift.

So what is Challenge 4:29 all about? I keep a piece of paper on my desk, and I write down what time of the day it is that I failed Challenge 4:29. It's a lofty calling. And yet, that idea of only speaking positive things, only speaking uplifting things, only speaking upbuilding things – and Paul would say be honest and be strong in your honesty, don't avoid, but how we speak makes all the difference. Let's just say I'm a work in progress. Sometimes I have to look at my watch before I even get to my desk to write down the time. But you know what? I've noticed that once I start doing it, the time generally gets longer and longer before I make that mistake again.

Friends, if we are to be church, if we are to be the church that we understand ourselves to be – God's love in the world – this passage, and specifically that verse, needs to be rooted in our hearts and in the way we communicate with one another every day. For I know that there are going to be challenges as we come back together, but I also know that our best is yet to come. I know that music will again go forth from our choir loft and our hearts, that we will once again nourish each other with food, that sermons while I'm gone and when I return will be full of life. I know that we each carry small hurts and big ones too about these last couple of years. And I know that love and forgiveness help us not just let them go, but find something better, deeper, and new.

As I prepare for my last week before sabbatical, I offer you what I pray for myself, and what Liz started every service with, and what Paul proclaims here. Friends, lead lives worthy of our calling. Be truth tellers. Lead lives of humility, gentleness and patience. Lift your hearts to one another only in love. And above all, guard, strengthen and honor that bond of peace, the one in Christ that surpasses all human understanding. And let that take us to joys yet unknown. Amen.