

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
11 Pentecost, Proper 14B. August 8, 2021 by The Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

1 Kings 19:4-8. Psalm 34:1-8. Ephesians 4:25-5:2. John 6:35, 41-51

How have you been responding emotionally and practically to the significant increase in Variant Covid cases in CT, as well as across the nation and world? We had begun to think that with a high percentage of us being vaccinated in CT, we were returning to a safer environment where we might not need to wear masks. Now our hopes of quickly entering a post-Covid season have been shattered. No one, including the best scientific experts, knows what the future will be like.

In the midst of these frustrating realities, what might God want to say to you and me this morning, as we enter this new unknown world of new Covid Variants?

In today's Epistle, we heard the guidance St Paul gave to early Christians in Ephesus about how God was calling them to think, speak and act as they were experiencing many threats from the pagan Roman Empire. They were often being verbally insulted, threatened and attacked, physically and economically persecuted, imprisoned, even killed for being followers of Jesus. Like us, they did not know what their future would hold or how long the threats would continue.

Paul didn't speak specifically about the Roman threats or the unknowns of the future. Instead, Paul reminded them of the basic principles and values Jesus expected them to live in their daily interactions with people in the church and in their society. Paul's word of guidance to the Ephesians may also be God's word of guidance to us about how to focus our lives as we enter this frustrating new and continuing challenge of the pandemic.

Last Sunday we read the verses that come before today's reading from Ephesians. Paul began by saying: "I beg you Ephesians to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Paul was saying: remember, you are children of God sent to this world to represent Christ and God's Kingdom.

Then Paul becomes very specific about how they are to do this: "with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Paul connects this "back to basics" message with their baptism, using the same words we still use in our baptism service. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

As you may remember, the early Christians went through a three-year preparation before they could be baptized. It took this long because they were required to change their

lifestyle, their attitudes, their way of speaking and relating to other people from the normal self-centered, verbally abusive interactions that were common in the Roman Empire, into the radically different way of love that Jesus lived and taught them to live.

In baptism preparation they were taught that learning to embody the Jesus way of love is a life-long process. It would be very difficult to keep living against the grain of pagan Roman society. They needed the help of God's Holy Spirit given to them in Baptism and the prayer support and encouragement of a community to sustain them and help them keep on living the radical "Jesus way of love" in the middle of all the threats and unknowns they were facing.

Continuing in today's epistle, Paul outlines this Jesus way of life they promised to live in their baptism. I invite you to take out your Scripture insert, (if you are reading this online, take out your Bible and follow along in Ephesians 4:25-5:2) and follow along as we reflect a bit about each of the phrases of guidance that Paul gives.

First Paul says: PUT AWAY FALSEHOOD, SPEAK THE TRUTH TO YOUR NEIGHBORS. Have you noticed how difficult it seems to be for many in our society to simply tell the truth? In many situations, it is difficult to really know what is true. Sometimes people tell outright lies with clear intent to distort the truth for their benefit. Other times we tell half-truths, to try and make ourselves or a situation look better than we are. We can also exaggerate, making a situation look worse than it actually is. Many times people do not speak up for the truth they know, but remain silent and give the false impression that they support what is a lie. Paul quotes the 10 Commandments when he says, followers of Christ need to practice telling the truth, to the best of our ability.

Next Paul says: BE ANGRY BUT DO NOT SIN. Are you surprised that the Paul tells us it is ok to be angry? God's gift of anger can be useful and helpful. Anger can be the fuel which motivates us to speak and work for change, for truth, for justice. Jesus got angry at those who were turning the temple into a shopping mall. He got angry at religious leaders who didn't want him to heal the sick man on the Sabbath. Anger at the slave trade motivated Christians to work for the abolition of slavery. Anger can empower people who are abused to get out of or change abusive situations. Anger can be an important motivator helping us work for what is right and just.

Anger can also be destructive and self-serving. It can flow from a selfish sense of entitlement: I deserve to get my own way in this and every situation and I don't care about anyone else. Angry words and attitudes can be intentionally hurtful and disrespectful of the dignity of others. Anger can block the capacity for people and groups to listen to each other and work together for healthy change. Paul says, use your anger constructively, in a focused and disciplined way, so that it can lead to positive outcomes for all.

Paul adds a phrase which is especially important for marriage and family life. Paul says, "DON'T LET THE SUN GO DOWN ON YOUR ANGER." If we do get angry, either in a good or bad way, we need to make our peace both inwardly and with the other person before the day is

over. Life is too short to harbor anger longer than one day. If we hang on to anger, it leads to bitterness and revenge. If we allow either hot anger or cold calculating anger to linger in us, then it gives room for the devil to take over. Paul says, be angry in ways that work for good and avoid being angry in ways that are destructive to ourselves and to our neighbors.

Next, Paul says, **DON'T STEAL, RATHER WORK AND SHARE WITH OTHERS IN NEED.** This was a radical thing to say in the first century Roman Empire. Stealing was normal practice in that society. Yet Paul reinforces what God said in the 10 commandments, you shall not steal, no matter what people do in the society around you. God requires us to be honest and loving toward our neighbors, which includes not taking what rightfully belongs to someone else.

Paul adds, thieves need to work honestly **"SO THEY HAVE SOMETHING TO SHARE WITH THE NEEDY"**. God's way of love requires us to be aware that whatever money or resources we have earned are given to us so that we can share with our neighbors in need as well as sustaining ourselves. Early Christians amazed their Roman neighbors by the amount of resources they gave away to people in need. I wonder, what percentage of your income do you intentionally share with people in need, as well as caring for your own needs?

Paul's next guidance is, **DON'T USE YOUR WORDS FOR EVIL BUT RATHER FOR GOOD.** We all pollute the ecology of human relationships by our words sometimes. How many times this past week did you and I say unkind or unnecessary things, simply venting our frustrations? Paul says, think and pray before you speak. Use your words so that others are strengthened and encouraged and built up by what you say.

Paul reminds us that, from our Baptism, the Holy Spirit dwells within us, closer to us than our breathing, moment by moment. God's Spirit hears our thoughts and words, feels the emotions in us and in the people with whom we talk. Often God's Spirit is grieved, God is saddened because our words work against God's desire for the unity and healing of all people. In what ways did you and I grieve and sadden God's Spirit this past week because of our thoughts, words and deeds?

We confess our sins as part of our worship each week so that we can be forgiven for the ways in which we grieve God. Fortunately, God is always eager to forgive and cleanse us and strengthen us to begin again each day to seek to be more pleasing to God's Spirit in our attitudes, words and relationships.

Finally, Paul has a list of things which are destructive to good relationships. He says, "put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice." Then he adds a list of things we should do: "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you."

We are entering a new season of the pandemic. We don't know what the future will be like, but we do know from experience that people in our society have often behaved selfishly, with frustration, anger and condemnation of others. None of us are exempt from these

temptations. Paul tells us that God's will for us is not to lower our standards to the poor behavior of people around us or to our own worst responses.

Rather, amid all the unknowns and the temptations to frustration and anxiety, Paul calls us to focus on living our baptism vows, living the way of love Christ lived and taught us to live. This needs to be our focus each day. As Paul summarized it: "walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us".

Now, in a few moments of silence, I invite you to read back over this reading from Ephesians. From this list, what one area might God be inviting you to focus on today, to help you resist the temptation to responses which are not in harmony with the Jesus way of love...and help you embody the Jesus way of love a bit more faithfully in this time of Covid anxiety and conflicts in our society?...

(During the service, we proceeded to renew our Baptism Vows on page 292 of the BCP, as Paul was doing in the reading. For those who were not there I have added this suggested way of continuing to practice what Paul was trying to teach us.)

This week, I invite you to continue this practice of reading over Ephesians 4:25-5:2 each day. (This might be a helpful practice to keep returning to for as long as the pandemic continues to impact our lives.) Pay attention to which characteristic in Paul's list which you sense God might invite you to focus on for that one day. Be patient with yourself. For as long as we live, we will be beginners who are still learning how to practice this Jesus way of life. Jesus is not looking for perfection, but for people who will keep beginning again each day, seeking his help to keep learning and growing in the practice of the Jesus way of love, regardless of what is going on in the society around us.