

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14) – Year B – August 12, 2009 - Homily
2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51
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Movies like *Pay it Forward* highlight the theme. Quotes that have made it bumper stickers like the one that reads, “Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty” also bring a little to our discussion this evening. There is even a brand of clothing called A-R-K, or Acts of Random Kindness. ARK asks their wearers to do something kind for someone else every time they wear their logo-emblazoned shirts. With all the good intentions in the world, each of these ultimately fails to grasp the full meaning of our reading from Ephesians tonight, for one simple reason. They are all human-made, human-inspired, and humanly motivated. In *Pay it Forward*, a little boy co-opts the classic pyramid scheme for a school project that is supposed to change the world. Those who receive a gift of kindness are encouraged to share it with three others instead of paying it back. It catches on and does seem to make a difference in the characters’ lives. The bumper sticker quote probably came from peace activist Anne Herbert, who says she wrote it on a placemat at a restaurant in the early ‘80s. And the clothes? According to the ARK website, this is an ethically sourced clothing line produced by a non-profit company, with the sole purpose of inspiring kindness. So what is missing? We are about to find out from Paul’s letter.

In the passage just before tonight’s reading, Paul has been making a major comparison between the lives of non-Christians and the new lives in Christ of believers. He speaks of renewal, a new life in the Holy Spirit, also of a new creation, putting away the old self “corrupt and deluded by its lusts”. And he tells of being clothed in righteousness and holiness. So then, we are not just individuals anymore wandering in the wasteland of our own wants, needs, and desires. You and I are in transition – part of a dynamic movement, one that needs others to thrive, rests in God, is powered by the Holy Spirit, and is constantly being transformed into Christ-likeness. We are the Body of Christ, members one of another, a community of the Holy Spirit abroad in the world.

In this portion of Ephesians, Paul is outlining all the behaviors that apply to the world, those who do not know Christ yet, and all the behaviors that apply to disciples of Christ. Like most of Scripture, what is so delightful in this letter is that Christians are not somehow sanitized, gleaming façades of real people. Glittering images if you will. There are strong emotions like anger. There are thieves. There are gossipers and backbiters. And there are all kinds of unpleasant behaviors that Paul could easily have whitewashed over, but takes the time to bring it into the light, in all honesty, whilst leading us all onward into the God-desired, Spirit-inspired, trained and directed behavior that Christ modeled for us. You’ve probably heard of the proverbial phrase, “fake it ‘til you make it”. In this context, it is like a breath of fresh air, and a clear indicator that the path to holiness, the process also called sanctification, is not straight, easy or instantaneous.

In the Gospel of John a couple of weeks ago, we learned that *our* work is faith in Christ Jesus, the Word made flesh. We have to believe that God is remodeling our hearts and minds into Christ-likeness, and in the meantime, we have to grow into the identity that we have accepted as Christians. These are intentional disciplines of faith. We are trying to do what comes most unnaturally to every human being, as a means to making it the habit of our hearts, and the natural path of our Godly response in all circumstances. It means moving from the self-centered “I” and”

me” focus, to the relational, Christ-centered “we” and “you” focus. Living into holiness means choosing those behaviors that enhance relationship and enrich the Christian community. Frederic D. Huntington, the first Episcopal Bishop of Central New York put it like this, “Holiness is religious principle put into action. It is faith gone to work. It is love coined into conduct; devotion helping human suffering, and going up in intercession to the great source of all good.”

Now to the specifics! We often tell little lies because we think it is kinder than telling someone the truth. Yet, I can’t tell you how many times in my life the little lie has come back to bite me, and even worse. The person I was trying to protect is even more upset and hurt than if I’d just spoken the truth with love in the first place. You know what the Scripture says about lies, and the devil, who is the Father of lies (John 8:44). In God there is only Truth, and in our relationship with God there is only truth – because God knows our hearts, and nothing can be hidden from Him. Truth and honesty are the foundations of all good relationships. Since we are being told to be imitators of God, then truth is a virtue we must strive for, and since we are members of the Body of Christ, which is a community in intimate relationship, then for the Body’s sake we must speak the truth with love. Building up the Body of Christ, striving for and maintaining unity in the Spirit of love is a high priority in Christian discipleship. It is again, for the sake of community that we must acknowledge our anger, but seek to resolve its source through reconciliation. According to Paul, harboring anger opens a gateway to evil, and evil in our hearts festers and grows, it burns with bitterness and wrath, and often leads us into saying things we later regret. There is nothing godly about evil, it distances us from God, in the same way that sin does, and grieves the Holy Spirit.

Continuing to close the gap between Jesus’ behavior and our own, we hear about the directions to thieves. Clearly, there are no barriers to becoming a Christian. Even a dubious lifestyle and poor choices are redeemed by God’s grace through the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. But the reason Paul supplies as incentive for giving up a life of crime is worth noting. This is not, as we might have supposed, anything to do with basic honesty, or turning our attention to earning our own living. Becoming honest and working for a living is so that we can “have something to share with the needy.” Imagine the possibilities here. If we really took this seriously, our working lives would not be aimed at getting a better house, car, earning a good pension, or for the sake of social status. That is all worldly stuff. Our motive for working, and our choices would be entirely focused on how well that work either directly or indirectly enabled us to help the poor and needy of the world. If our work is not directly helping others, then the implication is that the money we are earning is just a gateway to greater generosity and sharing.

The hallmark of our lives in Christ and constant movement towards holiness, which is by definition a constant movement towards God, is evident in our kindness and forgiveness of others. As followers of Christ, our acts of kindness flow from God, who is the source of all good gifts. Therefore unlike the acts in the movie *Pay it Forward*, or anything we might respond to from a bumper sticker or a brand of clothes, our acts of kindness are neither random, nor compelled by duty, guilt or a feeling that we must repay a debt. They are God-inspired, God-directed, and the very best of all, they are intentionally offered by hearts, hands and minds in loving gratitude for all that God has done for us, to God for the glory of God’s name.

Amen.