

“MARKS OF DISCIPLESHIP: VI – SEEK TO BUILD UP”

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Ephesians 4:25-5:2

We had our annual EUMC staff picnic the other night, and it was great fun! We sat around and enjoyed some good food, and had a great time just being together and talking with one another. As we are wont to do when we get together, we start telling stories. And at one point, we were telling high school stories, which for all of us who were there, was a long time ago!

Anyway, in the course of the conversation, I mentioned that when I was in high school, I was not part of the “in” crowd, but another staff member, Donna Horgan, who graduated with me, was! You know, it was people like football players and cheerleaders, and people who were just generally considered cooler than all the rest of us! My saving grace was that my father was one of the best liked teachers in the school, so, although I was not in the “in” crowd, I wasn’t a total outside either.

Anyway, we talked about that the other night and laughed about it, but I have to tell you I didn’t laugh about it when I was in high school. It hurt back then, because when you’re that age, you want more than anything to be accepted by others and to be considered okay.

Looking back on those years now, it makes me sad that I, and so many others, stressed over that – trying to measure up to other people, or what other people thought was good. I spend a lot of time trying to encourage young people not to get caught in that trap, because it’s such wasted energy. You don’t have to be better than anybody else, or compare yourself to anybody else – you are okay just as you are for who you are. Yet, no matter how much I say that, I know it’s something that every young person has to figure out for himself or herself.

Actually, it’s not just young people that have to figure that out. Everybody does, and I have come to realize that most people want to be liked, and want to know that they matter and are a valuable part of whatever group or groups they’re in.

The Apostle Paul certainly seemed to know that as well. Search the scriptures and you’ll discover that Paul spends a lot of time talking about community and belonging, and how we treat one another. Such is the case with today’s epistle lesson from the Book of Ephesians. You might remember that last week we looked at how Paul said each person should use their gifts to help bring unity to the Body of Christ. This week, he continues on that unity and community theme, turning now to how we treat one another.

You know, Paul was well acquainted with not being in the “in” crowd, and frankly, not even being welcomed in the community. Remember his story? He was Saul, the greatest persecutor the early Christian church had ever experienced. He went after those early Christians with a vengeance, doing his level best to wipe them out. And then came the day when he was on the road to Damascus, and was literally knocked to his feet by the Lord, rising up a new person in Christ.

He was totally transformed when he accepted Christ into his life, trouble was that the community, the church, didn't quite believe it. They were skeptical that a person who had been that rabid about wiping them out, was now going to be one of them. They didn't trust him, they didn't trust that he could be so completely changed, so he was on the outside looking in.

So when he writes this letter to the Ephesians, he writes from what he knows personally, how much it hurts to be treated badly. He knows what it feels like to be whispered about, and gossiped about, and for people to be suspicious of his motives, and frankly, of his faith. He knows what it's like to be excluded and deemed not worthy.

And most of all, he knows that churches and church people dare not treat people that way or the church will ring hollow in the world – they'll hear the church saying one thing, but doing another. All those things that people like to say about churches being filled with hypocrites, will suddenly ring true.

For Paul, community was so important. Oh, he would be shocked at how the sense of community has changed in our world today. I read this week about a book written by Harvard professor Robert Putnam entitled *Bowling Alone*. In it, he explores the decline in community life in America over the last four decades. He illustrates the decline through statistics such as these:

- The percentage of adults who belong to a bowling league today is only about a quarter of what it was in the 1960's.
- The percentage of people who volunteer in a political campaign – stuffing envelopes, making phone calls, going door to door – is about half of what it was in the 1960's.
- Active membership in local clubs and organizations, like the PTA, has dropped by about half, percentage-wise, since the 1970's.
- People are visiting one another less frequently, having friends over for dinner less frequently, getting together to play cards less frequently.

And the author who cited this information concluded with this, “There are forces in our society which are pulling people apart, isolating them, making it more difficult for them to come together in community.” And, he added, “We as a church are subject to those same forces.” (On-line, “Building Community – Encourage One Another,” Pastor Jon Haakana)

We are indeed. All of us have seen the change over the years. The forces of society have disconnected us in many ways, which is why we need to really listen to what Paul has to say to the Ephesians. Because his words will serve us well in strengthening the community of the church, and of the church helping to encourage community in the world.

So let's look at some of the things Paul called the Ephesians and calls us to do. He tells us, for one, to be aware of how we treat each other and speak to each other. Oh friends, words have the power to heal or the power to hurt. Mark Twain once said that "I can live for two months on a good compliment." Good words, compliments, lift people up, encourage them.

Conversely, hurtful, critical things can wound people, and some of those wounds they carry around for years. I still remember something a classmate said to me in high school that really hurt me. Criticism hurts, it wounds.

It's our choice, how will we speak and how we will act. But the late great psychologist Leo Buscaglia said something that would guide us well. He said, "Human beings are frail, we are vulnerable, we are easily spooked. It is so easy, because we are so frail, to put a hole in someone and make them suffer. But it's almost as easy to cover up the hole with the same finger that made it. It just depends on what side of the person you're on." (Leo Buscaglia, *Living, Loving and Learning*, p. 51.

It's our choice how we treat people, but Paul admonishes to remember that all people are children of God, and deserve to be treated with kindness, respect and dignity, deserve to be spoken to well, deserve to be lifted up instead of ground down, deserve to be dealt with honestly and openly, deserve to be told the truth in love, deserve to be forgiven. It's our choice, but Paul says, choose the better way, the way of love, the way of community.

Besides speaking to one another well, Paul also directs us to care for one another – to live in love, as he puts it – to encourage one another. Remember earlier, when I told you about Paul being rejected by the church when he was first converted? Well, there was a very good chance that he would have been turned away but for a man by the name of Barnabas, who cared about him and for him.

Barnabas went to the elders of the church and spoke a word on behalf of Paul, spoke passionately about his changed life, and pleaded with them to give Paul a chance, to trust that God had worked a miracle in his life. And thanks be to God, because of Barnabas, they did. They opened the door to let Paul begin his ministry, and look at the amazing things he did – becoming the greatest evangelist Christianity has ever known. And it might never have happened, had Barnabas not intervened, cared for him and encouraged him.

You see, Paul knew well how it felt to be cared for and lifted up, because his life was changed forever when Barnabas did that for him. He calls us to do that for others, to lift up instead of put down, to reach out and care for others in need in whatever ways we can, to, as he says “imitate God” which absolutely includes caring for people.

I read a story this week about a person who was visiting San Francisco and one day found herself at the top of one of those incredibly steep hills that fill that city. She looked over and saw a car stopped at the top of the hill and behind the wheel sat an obviously panic-stricken woman. Try as she might, every time she tried to move forward, the car would go backwards. You know what it’s like on a steep hill. Anyway, the more she tried, the more it didn’t work, and the more panicked and frightened she became.

Finally the tourist saw a man come out of the corner market, and he went over to the driver’s door, told her to put on her emergency break and then the woman got out of the car, went over and got in the passenger side, and the man from the market took over behind the wheel and promptly drove the car up and over the dreaded hill.

Meanwhile, the tourist walked over to the store where the man’s wife was waiting. Turns out the man owned that market, and he’d been doing that same thing for years – during peak season – rescuing as many as ten scared drivers a week! (*Random Acts of Kindness*, p. 108)

Isn’t that really what Paul is calling us to do? To watch out for people, to do what we can to make life easier for them, to help them when life gets overwhelming or they’re scared, or feeling unworthy? Sometimes it doesn’t take much, sometimes it takes a lot – but what it takes – always – is for us to have hearts that care, like God cares for us – hearts that notice, hearts that want what’s best for others, hearts filled with love.

We may live in a society whose forces try to disconnect us, but we are people of a loving and connecting God, who have the power to be agents of change, saying the world doesn’t have to be this way. We have the power by imitating God and living in love to promote unity and community in a world that desperately needs it right now.

Let me close with an image that I hope will inspire you to imitate God and live in love. One dark winter evening, when writer Robert Louis Stevenson was a child, he stood at the window and watched as the lamp-lighter came down the street lighting the gas lamps. He called out to his mother, “Mother, look, I see something wonderful. There’s a man coming down the street poking holes in the dark.” (Brian A. Bauknight, *On a Wing and a Prayer*, p. 38)

Oh, that the same could be said of you and me, that by imitating God, and living in love, we can poke holes in the dark and shine Christ’s light and love on our hurting world and make it more the community it was meant to be. May it be so.

Amen.