**Ephesians 4:29-5:2** September 27, 2020

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*Ephesians 4:29Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

*5:1Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children 2and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**The Christian’s Superpower: Forgiveness**

These are difficult times. By no means the most difficult the world has seen, or even our nation, but the worst we have seen in the last half century or more. Every day we hear shocking new news. It upsets us. Perhaps you, like I, have acquired the bad habit of talking at the supper table about the latest “Can you believe what I heard today?” story. Not that we should ignore these things, but the way the discussion turns usually ends up with raised blood pressure and ill thoughts of others. Or maybe, instead of the supper table, it’s social media. Or maybe you just sit there muttering angry nonsense to yourself and the television. At any rate, most of us find ourselves drawn into conversations about the problems of the day, more often than we would like.

How would you characterize those discussions? Are they mostly complaining sessions? Maybe the feeling is hopelessness, or even fear . Or maybe you scare yourself, when you hear yourself making angry statements about what you would like to do to “people like that!” I don’t know. I do know that this year has been an exceptionally challenging year. Not only in health matters, and political matters, and social matters, but in here, spiritually. Yes, this has been a spiritually challenging year.

We need to realize that. We need to realize that our reactions to the shocks of 2020 are first and foremost a spiritual issue. Today’s reading from the letter to the Ephesians addresses the spiritual side of how we react to the world we live in.

First off, it says, ***“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths.”*** Think about that: *no* unwholesome talk. Compare *that* to your most recent blood pressure raising conversation: *no* unwholesome talk.

Think about how wide a meaning that word ***“unwholesome”*** has. My parents taught me to watch my language: to not use God’s name in vain, to not lie, to not tell dirty jokes. But ***“unwholesome talk”*** covers way more than that. No unwholesome talk? *Anything* that even hints at suggestive filth? *Any* sarcasm intended to cut people down with a clever backhand? *Any* sleight against someone’s personal dignity? Isn’t it a bit much to expect *nothing* unwholesome to come out of our mouths, ever? Especially in 2020? Listen, I’m not telling you grandma’s Pollyanna approach to life: “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all” This is God’s law: nothing unwholesome, nothing that tears others down, that shows a lack of respect for them, no matter how much you disagree with them. God says so.

All of the hurtful sarcasm: sin. All of the jokes that you wouldn’t tell in mixed company: sin. All of the insults: sin. All of the talking behind someone’s back: sin. All of the angry, belittling comments, even if they the ones who are wrong: sin. All of the wishes that people would go hurt themselves: sin.

Verse 31 follows this up with a catalogue of sinful responses to the realities of life: ***“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander.”*** [By the way, the word translated here “brawling” isn’t translated that way by any other Bible translation. The Greek says “shouting,” as in loud obnoxious shouting matches.] This is a catalogue of sins, focusing on how we react to bad things that are happening around us. ***“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, [shouting] and slander.”*** Get rid of it all, ***“along with every form of malice.”***

Compare that to how you react. How do you react to riots? To presidents? To disasters? To political feuds? What does the discussion around the supper table sound like? What sorts of emojis punctuate your messaging on the causes of the day? What sorts of initials do you use—you know, like SMH, shaking my head—only some aren’t quite so polite. Look back on your last week. How did you react to Daniel Cameron’s conclusions that he presented to the grand jury? Or if you were okay with that, how did you respond to the people who complained that it was unfair? Don’t think of Daniel Cameron or any protester. You can’t do anything about either of them. You see, God is not talking about either side of *any* issue. He is talking about you, how you react. We are not free to be disobedient, to be insulting, to belittle, to disrespect or any of that stuff, no matter whether we agree or disagree.

“But these are tough times, Pastor.” Don’t give me that excuse! Remember that the injustices surrounding the Christians to whom this was written. They had been driven out of worship facilities. They had been the targets of riots. Read it in Acts 19. The culture surrounding them far more immoral than ours. It didn’t even have the vestiges of a Christian past. To such Christians, God said, ***“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths… Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger”*** and so forth.

Oh, when we hear what God says here, we realize that so many of the comments that we have made, so many of the conversations we have had, have fallen so far short of the glory of God. At how many points have we *not* been God’s lights shining into the world! How often we have not treated people as God would have us treat them! Lord, forgive us. Forgive us for Jesus sake! And help us to reform our ways.

But how? How can we do better?

Here’s the problem: by nature we can’t do any better. By birth and by upbringing I am spiritually dead. No matter how long you poke a dead dog on the road, it isn’t going to get up and run. No matter what we do, by the natural-born power that is in us we can’t do anything that God wants.

In our reading, Paul does not just tell us how we ought to act, he also tells us how in the world we can act that way. He tells us how to frustrate the sinful human nature inside us which loves to wallow in bitterness, anger and insult. He tells us the secret, not once, but twice. First, in verse 32: ***“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”*** Then in 5:2 he tells us, ***“Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*** He takes us back to the source of forgiveness, and that source is not inside ourselves. He takes us back through time to Christ Jesus. His cross is the source of forgiveness. Forgiveness flows from his bloodied wounds to us. And that forgiveness, once it has cleansed and filled our hearts, then flows out into and through our lives. We love sacrificially because Christ Jesus loved us sacrificially. We forgive because God forgave us.

Jesus has to be the source of forgiveness and our new lives, because we cannot work up that power in ourselves. It has to come from outside me. It is super-human. It has to be, dare I say it, a superpower.

Now when we think of a superpower, we think of an ability to do amazing things that defy the laws of nature: running at the speed of sound or being ridiculously strong. Superpowers have this aura of raw, fearsome force. There is a certain appeal in that, as a certain woman found out.

It was the cool of the day, the comfortable part where the air is just right, and the sun is getting lower in the sky. Though the green trees were bearing their fruit, it was the springtime of the earth. Her name was Eve. She was near the one tree that she had not eaten the fruit of, and she was good with that, because if God didn’t want her to eat from it, that was okay. He is God, and had done so much for her and her husband. Then someone piped up, someone she didn’t expect. After quibbling over the rules about the fruit, he threw this one at her: *“God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like him.”* That was the corker. To be like God? The thought had never occurred to her! To speak, and things happen. To have no questions; only answers. To be in charge and to answer to none. Even if it weren’t entirely true, but even just to have *one* of God’s superpowers, that would be worth bending the rules just this one time, right?

I put it that way to make you think about this wonderful verse from today’s reading: ***“Be imitators of God, as dearly beloved children.”*** Through Christ Jesus we are given a superhuman power. It is not the sort of fearsome superpower our human nature thirsts for. But it is another God-like power that no human has of themselves, until it is given through faith. And now we have that power that originated in God. ***“Forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God… Speak only what is helpful for building others up according to their need… Be kind and compassionate to one another… live a life of love.”*** Oh, we would like the sorts of powers that would let us bend iron bars, but really what does that accomplish compared to forgiveness? Superhuman strength can make people cower in fear, but God-given forgiveness ends the argument. Power to blow up a planet didn’t save us, but God’s power of forgiveness did. Awesome strength might make people reconsider their next hostile move, but forgiveness removes the hostility. What power!

Imagine it this way. Imagine being in a traffic jam, a total and complete traffic jam. Everyone was in such a rush to be first to get where they were going that no one can move anywhere; complete gridlock. The only way anything can happen is if someone voluntarily gives something up, space, a place in line, so that someone else can go before them. That is forgiveness. Forgiveness is voluntarily letting go of the right that we have to be upset about something. It is letting go of the hurt and anger that someone else’s sin has caused in our life—think of Joseph in the Old Testament reading forgiving his brothers. Forgiveness is *not* insisting on my rights, but instead giving some of them up. For Christians, who realize we have been forgiven so much by our God, that should come easily. And if it doesn’t come easily, at least when we are reminded we need to say, “Oh yah. Thank you for reminding me. Let me forgive as Christ forgave me.”

And then we become a picture that cannot help but bring a smile to your face. Imagine a four-year old sitting on the bathroom sink, shaving cream on his face and a safe razor in his hand, watching Dad, and shaving just like Dad does. Is there anything more likely to make you forget the badness of the day than the little girl clomping around in her mom’s heals, lipstick on her face (not just on her lips) and mom’s dress trailing behind her. ***“Be imitators of God, as dearly beloved children.”*** Forgive. Is there anything more healing than a Christian who takes her right to be angry and hold a grudge and tosses it out the window and says, “I forgive you.”

Why not? Why not, when you hear the next infuriating story, ***“Live a life of love…forgive… Be imitators of God as dearly beloved children.”*** You will find that Christ’s forgiveness that lives in you is a superpower. Amen.