

Twelfth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): Rubies or Reptiles, Your Choice  
Ephesians 4:25-5:2, John 6:35, 41-51  
August 10-11, 2024  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I was at a Peaceful Conflict Resolution workshop last weekend. One of the facilitators announced on Saturday morning, “We’re expecting some brand-new people today.” He clearly was saying we’d be joined by folks who hadn’t been with us the night before, but it made me think, “We’re all brand-new people through Holy Baptism, but we don’t always **feel** or **act** like it.”

Today’s letter to the Ephesians tells us how “brand-new people,” **God’s** people, act:

- We choose to challenge falsehoods and refuse to lie to protect or advance ourselves (Eph. 4:25)
- We courageously speak the truth to our neighbors, even if it costs us (Eph. 4:25);
- We identify and invest our talents, work hard, then generously share the fruits of our labors with God’s children (Eph. 4:28);
- We don’t talk smack about anybody, instead using words that “*build up*” rather than tear down, words that “*give grace to those who hear*” (Ephesians 4:9);
- We don’t hurt God’s heart (“grieve the Holy Spirit of God,” Eph. 4:30);
- We let go of resentments, asking God for grace to forgive **and** forget (“*bitterness*,” Eph. 4:31);
- We take a spiritual fire extinguisher to anger that threatens to blaze up into a relationship-destroying inferno (“*wrath*,” Eph. 4:31);
- We refuse to feed the fire or stir the embers of long-standing grievances;
- We don’t stoop to name-calling and insults, whether the object of our disdain is present or not (“*slander*,” Eph. 4:31);
- We are “*kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven [us]*” (Eph. 4:32);
- We’re “*imitators of God, as beloved children... [living] in love, as Christ loved us...*” (Eph. 5:1-2)

Here’s the contemporary version (from *The Message*) of Paul’s “Rules for the New Life”<sup>1</sup> sent to the fledgling Christian community in Ephesus. It’s so **basic** it’s **beautiful**. Paul sounds less like a theologian and more like a commencement speaker:

*<sup>25</sup> What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ’s body we’re all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself.*

*26-27 Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life.*

*28 Did you use to make ends meet by stealing? Well, no more! Get an honest job so that you can help others who can't work.*

*29 Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift.*

*30 Don't grieve God. Don't break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don't take such a gift for granted.*

*31-32 Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you.*

*5 1-2 Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.*

Paul has a lot to say about **Christ** elsewhere, but here he reminds us what it looks like to be **Christlike**, which **is** the **point** of being a Christian. A giant book of fairy tales provided many bedtime stories when I was growing up, and I've always vividly remembered the story of Diamonds and Toads. There were 2 girls who were stepsisters. One looked and acted like her haughty mother, and the other looked and acted like her kind father. One day the super-kind one went to draw water from the well and encountered an old woman who asked for a drink of water. The girl served it to her with a smile. Turns out the old woman was actually a fairy who thanked the girl by making a gem or a flower fall from her mouth every time she spoke. The stepmother who was nasty was also greedy. She so loved the pearls and diamonds popping out of her stepdaughter's mouth that she sent her own daughter to the well to meet the fairy. That girl responded rudely to the request for a drink of water, so she was hit with a curse that turned every word she spoke into a toad hopping or a snake slithering out of her mouth.

We've been told:

*29 Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is good for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. (Ephesians 4.29)*

So we've gotta ask: when **we** speak, are rubies or reptiles tumbling out of our mouths? Fine gems or frogs? Do our words build others up or tear them down? I came across a few relevant sayings the other day. One is:

- “Be a fountain, not a drain.” (Rex Hudler) May the words you speak to others **refresh** them, not **deplete** them. By God's grace, channel life **to** them; don't suck it **out** of them. “Be a fountain, not a drain.”

Another quote is from the Dalai Lama: “Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible.”

And another:

The words “I am” are potent words; be careful what you hitch them to. The thing you're claiming has a way of reaching back and claiming you. (A.L. Kitselman)

In other words, frame your self-descriptions, your words about yourself, positively. At the Peaceful Conflict Resolution workshop I attended, each participant had to come up with an affirming adjective, either **beginning** with the first letter of his or her first name, or **sounding** like the first letter. I chose Mindful Mary. (I liked the sound of “Mystical Mary,” but that was too “out there”!) Other adjectives people picked included caring, cool, cheerful, delightful, elevating, joyful, magical, smiling. Every time we spoke we had to identify ourselves with our positive adjective and our name. Any guesses why?

- Yes, it's a great way to learn the names of others in the group!
- But also: when we view ourselves positively, we're more apt to view **others** in the same way: kindly. Glimpsing God in the other person helps us engage in honest yet caring dialogue about our differences and find ways to move forward despite them.

The words “I am” are potent and so are the words “You are.” The words we call people can stick to them like burrs on a sock. When we were little many of us memorized, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Our parents wanted to arm us with a force field to repel wounding insults. But you and I know from personal experience that words definitely **can** hurt us. We each have a list of wounding words that were flung at us as children,

and maybe another set that assaulted us when we got older. Jesus, the **Word** made flesh, certainly does not want the members of His Body to wound each other with words. He wants us to build each other up, not tear each other down. Even children intuitively know, most of the time, what words wound and what words heal.

I heard an art historian interviewed this past week about her favorite works of art in New York City. One painting she mentioned was *St. Francis in the Desert* by Bellini, hanging in the Frick. I saw it this past winter and it is indeed lovely, especially little animals nestled into the landscape so naturally. Francis is shown with the stigmata, nailmarks on his hands and feet, and a slash in his side, like the crucified Jesus. The woman being interviewed knows a lot about art history but made me twitch when she incorrectly said the stigmata is a sign that Francis had become divine! No one becomes divine! The stigmata, which has happened to more than one person, is both a medical and a spiritual mystery. It signifies deep communion with Jesus and His suffering on the cross, but does **not** bestow “divinity” on the recipient.

None of us can “become” God, but baptism **does** enable us to become Christ-like, “brand-new people.” St. Paul reminds us, we are called to imitate “...*God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us....*” (Ephesians 5:1-2) We have an opportunity to live in love every time we open our mouths. By God’s grace, we can control whether rubies or reptiles come out, whether we wound or heal, whether we hurt God’s heart or warm it. Amen

<sup>1</sup>Header for Ephesians 4:25-32 in *New Revised Standard Version*.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham