

12th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

When I was growing up, my father and I often would go backpacking. One of our favorite spots was a place called Mt. LeConte and we would often go up with a group of guys every January. Before I moved to Long Island, the most snow I had ever seen in my life was when we would traverse to the top of Mt. LeConte in the snowy winters of the Smoky Mountains outside Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Sometimes we would stay in cabins and other times in a simple lean-to close to the summit. I have many memories of reaching the top of the mountain, all of 6,593 feet above sea level, many times with my legs rather sore from making the slow trek up the mountain with crampons attached to my boots to prevent me from slipping on the ice. To be sure, Mt. LeConte was no Mt. Everest, but for a 13 year old boy going on an adventure with his dad, it might as well have been.

But before Dad and I ever left Dalton, Georgia for Gatlinburg, there was a ritual to be observed: packing our backpacks. We would spread out all our camping gear on the floor of the living room and pack our bags. And this was a crucial process because anyone who has been backpacking knows that although a pound may not seem like a lot when you're holding it in your hands in your living room, a pound seems a lot heavier when it's on your back and your trying to carry multiple pounds up a mountainside. I can think of a few times when I haphazardly packed, only to get halfway up the mountain to arrive at the conclusion that maybe, just maybe, the cast iron skillet wasn't the best choice.

All this is to say, we often burden ourselves with far too much weight. And the journey of this life is hard enough without excess baggage.

Now, as a pastoral note, I recognize that not all burdens are self-imposed. Not all burdens are carried by choice. For example, many of you know that I've struggled with depression a good bit during my life. And there have been moments when I would have *loved* to have released myself of that heavy burden but I was physically and *chemically* unable to do so.

So, to be clear, today's passage is the focus of those burdens we *do* choose to carry and we can have the power to give them up.

You see, hands *must* be free when they are needed for building. Several weeks ago, when we began our journey through the book of Ephesians, Paul reminded us that Christ has brought down the dividing wall between us. But, now that *that* oppressive wall has been brought to the ground, it is the work of the Church to build up something better in its place. It is our job to speak the truth in love while building up the Body of Christ and drawing the welcome circle wider. It has often been said that instead of bigger walls it is our holy task to build bigger tables with plenty of chairs for all.

Once the wrecking ball has had its time, you and I are called, as the Church, to build something up in its place. Once the wall comes down, once we are united in the Spirit under one faith, one hope, one Lord, we are called to build up structures of hope in a sea of despair. We are called to build up structures of abundance in a place of perceived scarcity. We are called to build up structures of welcome when the narrative of the day is about fearing the immigrant, the refugee, and the “other.” We are called to build up structures of truth when so much of what we hear today is reckless and childish rhetoric.

New structures are called to be built and we need our hands free for the building.

In order for our hands to be free, Paul gives us some very specific instructions for things that need to go to the wayside.

The first thing we are called to put away is falsehood. Last week, in chapter four of Ephesians, we talked about what it meant to “speak the truth in love.” Paul fleshes out how this is done by suggesting that the best way to speak the truth is to identify and cast aside falsehood. This can be a difficult task because we are often presented the choice between easy falsehoods and difficult truths and often we choose the former. However, the harder but more rewarding task is to seek the truth in love and to speak it. Paul tells us that this is so crucial because you and I are members of one another. You and I are intricately bound together and falsehood tears us apart in ways that are counter productive to the Christian narrative.

The second thing we are called to put down is anger but a very specific kind of anger. Today’s passage does not say to not be angry. In fact, it says the surprising opposite. It says, quite frankly, *to* be angry. However, there is a very inconvenient but necessary clause added after it. Be angry, it says, but do *not* let it lead to sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger. Friends, of all the imperatives in today’s passage, this is one that I particularly struggle with. I can think of more than one time in the past few months where I’ve let the sun go down on a silly anger I’ve had with someone I love. And it has weighed me down and it has weighed *them* down. It does no one any good. Now let us be clear: here, we are not talking about a righteous anger such as the anger we might have when we see injustices in the world. Here, Paul is talking about a selfish anger, an inwardly-focused anger that has more to do with pride than justice. Friends, we cannot let ourselves be weighed down with that when we have such an important building project in front of us.

Thirdly, thieves need to find another line of “work.” Now, I hope that not many of us have made our living by stealing. However, I’m sure many of us, including myself, have taken things that don’t belong to us and have received things that we haven’t earned. Paul encourages the thieves to stop their pickpocketing and to seek honest work in order that they may have something to share with the needy.

Fourthly, we are called to put aside evil talk. I’ve long said that whoever said “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me” was full of it. Words hurt. Words matter. Whether it’s a speech, a sermon, or a tweet, words can wound. But words also have the capacity to create and love and heal and save. It was with a word that God brought this world into being. It’s the words of prophets

that bring us back to righteousness and justice when we've strayed far from God's invitation. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Friends, our words can be our most powerful tool for good or ill. So let us take to heart Jesus' reminder that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles the body but what comes out of it. Paul reminds us to cast aside evil speech and to only use our words to give gifts of grace to build up rather than tear down.

Finally, Paul gives us a bit of a laundry basket of things to cast aside. Bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, and malice. All of these things divide us, friends. All of these things are unfortunately intuitive to most of us and we must work together to put these things down. We come together as a family to help each other put these things down. Because sometimes I hang on to things and I need someone who loves me to walk up to me and to say in love, "Stephen, that looks awfully heavy. Can I help you get rid of that?"

But Paul doesn't just leave today's passage at telling us the things to put aside and give up. When we work together to cast aside falsehood, selfish anger, stealing, and evil speech, look what tools we have before us to build up the Body of Christ! When our hands are free of such burdens, they are free to pick up far better things like kindness, truth, tender heartedness, and forgiveness. These are things that *relieve* burdens instead of adding *to* them. And when we pick up these things, it is like a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Together, we are called to be imitators of God because *these things* are the tools that God prefers to use and so should we. As God's beloved children, we are called to live in love by packing appropriately for the journey ahead.

One of the lectionary passages for this Sunday is the passage where the prophet Elijah is running away from the evil queen Jezebel who has put a price on the prophet's head. Elijah cowers away to the wilderness and hides under a broom tree. It is there that an angel of the Lord comes to him and tells him to stop his pity party and eat. The angel of the Lord gives Elijah food and says one of my favorite lines in the Old Testament: "Elijah, get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

Friends, as we pack for the journey ahead, we must use the right tools or else the journey will be too much for us. We cannot allow ourselves to be burdened with unnecessary, foolish, and destructive things. So, let us pack wisely and pick up the tools that, by God's grace, are at our disposal to build up the Body of Christ.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.