



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, *Chief of Parish Ministries*

Truth and Anger

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 9, 2015
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Ephesians 4:25-5:2*

Put away falsehood, speak truth to our neighbors, be angry but do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger. If you're stealing, stop it—work honestly to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouth. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and malice. Be kind and tenderhearted. Forgive one another as God in Christ forgave you. Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love.

Well, that is quite a list. I couldn't help but think when I read these verses that the church in Ephesus must have been a tough crowd. Not sure I'd want to hang out with them. The irony did not escape me that these verses appear in our liturgical calendar just as our own political system chugs into astonishing action with the debates this past week.

But then I realized that all of us can find ourselves in these verses somewhere. On our best days, we may actually show many or even all of the positive behaviors. On other days, we may find ourselves engaging in many or even all of these negative behaviors, especially if we are honest with ourselves ... if we are able to speak truth to ourselves and actually hear it.

My initial feeling about the church in Ephesus, to whom this letter may be addressed, turns out not to be the case. If you read the entire Letter to the Ephesians (which you can easily do in one sitting, even in summer—it's only 6 chapters), you get a bigger picture of a time when everything is actually going very well for the fledgling church. It's "a time of peace: the walls that divide people have come down. Hostility has given way to reconciliation." *

The author is addressing the much bigger picture: "what Christ means not only for Christians or even for all humanity but for everything in heaven and on earth ... By reconciling all people to God through the cross, Christ has created a new humanity, marked by peace rather than hostility ... The church's role is to make this new unity of humanity known." * And by church, this author means not the local church in Ephesus, but the Church universal.

Our verses today from Ephesians have to do with the practical implications: how to live with others in a community that functions as a single entity. I'd like to focus on just two of those practical implications. The first one is truth.

For the record, I like truth. I am highly in favor of it. I don't like waffling or "spin." I really don't like being lied to. I know that comes strongly from my parents, who were two of the most honest people I have ever known. Dad in a very emphatic way and Mom in a much gentler way insisted that my brother and I tell the truth as we were growing up.

I remember the very day when I learned I could not change the truth. I was age 5 or 6, with my neighborhood playmates in the Freemans' downstairs playroom. It contained a child-sized picnic table: a table top and two benches, all one piece. We were taking turns jumping off the top of the picnic table onto its attached bench, then onto the floor.

My turn came. I jumped from the table top onto the bench—and found myself standing on the floor between the two broken halves of the bench. There was a collective gasp of shock and horror. Then someone ran off to tell Mrs. Freeman, "Lynn broke the picnic table!"

Mrs. Freeman (one of the warmest, least judgmental people ever) came to investigate. Surrounded by my pint-sized playmates suddenly turned prosecutors, I knew I was in big, big trouble, bigger trouble than I ever imagined there could be. In that instant I turned away from all I had been taught and tried a new tactic: I turned to falsehood. I lied, insisting over and over I had not broken the table.

This case, of course, made its way to the supreme court, which is to say my father. After some painful conversations, I confessed to my crime. Apology and restitution were made. An incident soon forgotten by everyone else made a lasting impression on me. I learned that, much as I might try to change the truth, I could not. That it really was better, as my father said, to tell the truth up front and take the consequences.

Of course, over the years, one learns there are nuances to truth. We learn the truth can be told in ways that hurt others, or in ways that spare others' feelings as much as possible. We learn, don't we, that telling the truth can hurt us, as in, "Don't shoot the messenger." We learn to answer very, very carefully when asked, "Do these pants, skirt, dress, shorts make me look fat?"

Truth can be used as a weapon. As I heard Ann Ulanov, Professor of Psychiatry and Religion at Union Theological Seminary, once say: "We are not to bludgeon each other with the truth."

In some cases, truth must be sacrificed for a higher good. When the Nazis came to the door and asked, "Are you hiding any Jews here," the people hiding Anne Frank and her family did not say, "Oh yes. Here they are."

I think it's no accident that the advice about speaking the truth and "be angry but do not sin" are located right next to each other, and that anger is mentioned several times. That invites us to think about the relationship between truth and anger.

I know that when I am angry, I am much more likely to tell the truth in a harsh way. When we are angry, there may be great temptation to use truth—or untruth—as a weapon: to hurt, to embarrass, to trap, to make trouble for someone we perceive as our enemy.

Be angry, but do not sin (a quote from Psalm 4, by the way) says yes, feel your anger, one of the primary human emotions. I once told a counselor I felt hurt. She said, "No, you don't feel hurt. There are four primary human emotions: sad, mad, glad, afraid. Trace your feelings to one or more of those." That was good advice. Feel your anger, but be aware of your actions. Do not act from anger.

Anger is such a large issue. There's a reason it's mentioned several times here. Anger affects us on a daily basis. I choose not to drive in NYC. It makes me too anxious. But I find myself experiencing tiny flares of vicarious road rage—from the back seat of a taxi: He just cut us off! Learn how to drive! Or moments of (mostly private) subway rage or sidewalk rage: Don't stop in the middle of the sidewalk to check your iPhone!

Anger is incredibly corrosive to one's own spirit. It's also corrosive to a community. Think if you have ever had to deal with, on a long-term basis, someone prone to explosions of anger (wrath), or who is chronically angry—smoldering, just waiting for an excuse to erupt (hostility). Anger like that tends to limit relationships. It's hard to be in full relationship, whether in a family or work situation, when you constantly have to walk on eggshells or keep your armor on to protect yourself.

There is a good side to anger. Sometimes anger can be the fuel that propels action, like the booster that propels a rocket launch. That's what I think "be angry but do not sin" means: feel your anger and use it as a force to create good.

Of course, there is also righteous anger. Even Jesus overturned moneychangers' tables in the temple. We should be angry about injustice—every kind—and we should use our anger to do something about it. With this caveat: I notice I am quick to call my own anger righteous, less quick to name others' anger righteous.

Anger takes other forms. "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" speaks of resentment, of holding on to anger, letting it simmer, even nursing it, holding it protectively, feeding and watering it. That is bitterness.

There is wrangling: outcry, public clamor. There is slander, from the Greek *blasphemia*: disrespectful speech not just against God, but also against other people, like malicious talk designed to undermine someone's credibility. There is malice: plotting against others

These expressions of anger do not build up community. They limit it.

We, at St. Bart's, as part of the church universal, are called to behave in ways that build community. That strengthen and bind together, rather than corrode. To build community not just in here, but also out in the world, wherever we go. So that we can help make known, so that we can incarnate, the love of God made known in Christ for *all*.

The Greek words for forgiveness and grace are very similar. In the New Testament, grace usually refers to the undeserved forgiveness given by God. It can also be used to refer to the loveliness of harmonious relationships—the kind of relationships where we can drop our defenses, where we can resolve differences without bitterness, where we can live without fear.

Let's reflect as honestly as we can on truth and anger, on our own relationships with each of those, on what changes we might make in our own behaviors that will help build community.

Let us be kind and tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ forgives us.

Amen.

* *Introducing the New Testament, Volume 2*, by Mark Allen Powell, Grand Rapids MI: 2009 (eBook 2013).