

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

Scott Trevithick

Date: August 8, 2021. Year B, 11th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Title: What about “Sticks and Stones?”

Focus: It’s not just “sticks and stones” that hurt, but words too. How are we imitators of Christ and how do we use words that build up?

Epistle Reading: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

^{4:25} So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸ Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. ^{5:1} Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Wisdom Sayings

Take a moment to remember someone who has been a source of wisdom for you—by the example they have set, by what they have taught you, or things they have said. A person in my life like that was my Grandma T. We called my dad’s parents Grandma and Grandpa T, from our last name Trevithick. I was reminded of Grandma and Grandpa T this week when we hosted Bishop Megan Rohrer. Bishop Megan was born in South Dakota, as were Grandma and Grandpa T and my dad. My dad was born in Watertown, where the bishop said they have still have family. Though the bishop is several years younger than I, we got talking about the values that have been passed down to us from that South Dakota heritage and having family members who were shaped by the Great Depression. Sometimes that wisdom is conveyed by wisdom sayings or proverbs:

- “A stich in time saves nine.”
 - That means that if you spot a problem early and address it, it saves a lot more work later on by preventing it from getting worse.
 - This one makes me think of Grandma T because she was a seamstress who made their own clothes and kept a basket to set aside clothes for “mending;” she actually did the activity on which the saying is based.
- “A penny saved is a penny earned.”

I’m not sure I heard this from Grandma T, but she sure lived it. I was telling the Bible study group on Tuesday that Grandma T raised a family at the tail end of the Great Depression and then during the war years they had extended family members

from all over the country come to live with them. There were brothers and cousins and others who were working blue collar jobs at all shifts of the day and Grandma T cooked and baked from scratch, sewed their own clothes, and kept the household moving. The hardship of the depression and the continued rationing of all kinds of products during the war years shaped her character and created lifelong habits. She was frugal in every way—it was ingrained in her.

How about these others: Do you know these proverbs or wisdom sayings?

Two wrongs don't make right

- When someone does something bad to you, trying to do something bad to them will only make things worse.

Better safe than sorry

- You should always be careful, even if you think it's not necessary.

You can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink

- Because a horse has a mind of its own, only the horse can decide whether it wants to drink the water. The same applies to people. You can offer advice to another person, but it's up to them to decide what to do. We can't make them take the advice and use it.

Re-Writing Proverbs

These sayings are likely familiar to most of us, with some of them being more well-known than others. From time to time, I have seen that elementary school teachers have presented the first part of a wisdom saying to their class and asked them to complete the saying. The combination of kids not being familiar with the original saying and then having the tendency to think pretty literally or concretely produces some interesting responses, which can be wise in a different way.

“A penny saved. . .” We mentioned this one already—“A penny saved is a penny earned.”

- A kid completed this as: “A penny saved is . . . not much.”

“Don't count your chickens. . . before they hatch,”

- A wisdom saying about not expecting too much, as in “Don't depend on something happening until you know for sure it will.” Or it's a warning: “Don't get your hopes up or make plans because you may be disappointed.
- **Kids:** “Don't count your chickens. . . because they need their privacy.”

“People in glass houses. . . should not throw stones.”

- Which suggests that you should not criticize other people for bad qualities that you yourself have as well.
- **Kids' re-write:** “**People in glass houses. . . should not walk around naked.**”

Here's a childhood saying that you may know: **"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but . . . words can never hurt me."**

It's of course meant to be a defiant retort to a bully to their teasing or harsh words. It's a declaration that their words *can't* hurt you.

Unfortunately, it's not true. Harsh words do have an impact; they are hurtful.

If kids, who can be wiser than grown-ups, have re-written things like "A penny saved . . ." or "People in glass houses. . ." then "sticks and stones" should be re-written, too. Because it's just not so. Words can be hurtful. Words do have an impact.

Pastoral Wisdom

Short sayings or aphorisms aren't the only source of wisdom, of course. Our epistle reading from today from Ephesians offers practical pastoral wisdom in the Apostle Paul's name. *Epistle*, by the way, is the name for a letter. And we can see that from the content and tone of what's written. It has a conversational feel to it. It is full of instruction or exhortation—it encourages particular behavior. It's not quite as pithy or catchy as a true wisdom saying, but it has that feel.

One of the questions I often pose in Bible study is, "What catches your eye?" or "What sticks out to you?" Here is the one line which caught my eye. . .

- ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin;

This is a short, pithy phrase. It catches my eye.

Is it startling to you? I wonder if it catches you off guard when it advises, or at least starts, "Be angry. . ." The first part says, "Be angry" and then the second part is the qualifier, "but do not sin." I wonder if it sticks out because the "be angry" part is so often the opposite of what we do or try to do. Don't we have an imbedded message that tells us, "*Don't* be angry," Or maybe "Good people or good Christians *shouldn't* be angry," or maybe the message we have in our head is another childhood nursery rhyme¹,

What are little girls made of?
 Sugar and spice
 And everything nice
 That's what little girls are made of

I'm not saying that's the way "little girls" or any of us should be, but that rhyme is reflected in some of the social or gender expectations we have for one another. It suggests that little girls are full of "sugar and spice and everything nice" and that's the way it should be.

Last week I mentioned relocating across the country from Southern California where I grew up and went to college, to Johnson City, Tennessee where I went to work as Director of Youth Ministries in a Presbyterian Church there. Like my grandparents' trek from South Dakota to Long Beach, California mine from Southern California to

¹ Lyrics to "What Are Little Boys Made Of?"
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_Are_Little_Boys_Made_Of%3F

Northeast Tennessee was a huge cultural shift. When you are in a cross-cultural setting, as that was for me—when you're in a setting in which traditions, values, social norms, rules, language, and identity are defined as distinct from another setting and culture, then that contrast causes you to reflect on your own upbringing or imbedded culture and baseline orientation.

Part of the value for me in moving to a new place was for just that reason—for the growth that could come from that kind of new-ness and the self-reflection that it would prompt.

“Be Nice” is Valued

So, what did I see? I observed, for instance, that being “nice” was more highly valued than being direct or being honest. I observed that hospitality and being polite were highly enough valued that there were times when I saw people be outwardly pleasant with one another and then I later saw that they were harboring an undercurrent of irritation that could lead to resentment because it was unaddressed. The expectation or maybe even the social pressure to be “nice” led to avoidance of any discomfort caused by addressing conflict. People may recognize tension between them but could be too “nice” to address it directly.

If I was reading those observations accurately, that behavior is an interesting commentary on this kind of text in scripture. Because this phrase deserves some attention or a nuanced understanding:

- Part one (the first clause): “Be angry.”
- Part two (the second clause): “but do not sin.” The second phrase is a qualifier for the first.
- And there's even a third clause: “do not let the sun go down on your anger” (v. 26c). That sounds like a caution against the irritation I saw which, when unaddressed, can lead to resentment.

What's the intersection among these clauses? Meaning, when is it okay and good and even commendable to be angry and/or express that anger? And where or how shall we harness or redirect the power of anger to make sure it does not harm?

Be angry: In my sermon on July 11 entitled, “Prophets and Plumb Lines,” I talked about the hard job of a prophet. No one really wants that job. It's one to which you are called; you don't typically seek it out. It's a hard job because the primary role is to be a messenger and a truth-teller and that can get you into trouble when the truth you have to say agitates powerful people.

Prophets are called by God to be truth-tellers or to hold up that plumb line and demonstrate the gap between how God would have us live and the brokenness which affects human life. A prophet or truth-teller who confronts injustices and speaks up about them could be one who is righteously angry about what he or she sees. That's an example of “being angry” in a good way.

In another recent sermon (June 6), I talked about John Lewis, the civil rights leader and Georgia representative. He spoke about the formative influence Rosa Park had on him:

- “[She inspired us] to get in trouble. Good trouble, necessary trouble. When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to do something; you have to act.”²

I think that kind of speaking up, which could result in “good trouble, necessary trouble,” could fit in this description from Ephesians about being angry but channeling that anger in a particular way.

- Part one, the first clause of that line is “Be angry.”

“**But do not sin:**” is the second clause. The second phrase is a qualifier for the first. As I asked before, where is the intersection between these clauses? When are the times and places in which it is okay and good to express anger, to not let it simmer and fester and build, and yet also have the control or self-discipline to not be driven by it to harshly lash out as well?

Build up. . .

Another phrase which caught my eye:

- ²⁹Let 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.

Those being addressed in this letter belong to one another. The opening verse of this section describes them as “neighbors” or “members of one another” (v. 25). The letter writer (it’s attributed to Paul)³ seems to acknowledge that living in community, in intentional connection with each other, is inherently challenging, and yet urges us to have one’s expressions be motivated by and shaped by building up and not tearing down. Are our words a source of grace?

The final imperative verb in today’s reading is to “live in love.” It functions like a summary verse for the passage: ^{5:1} “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,² and live in love. . .”

Wisdom Sayings

I started by wondering if a particular wisdom saying can be re-written. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me” may be an attempt at a comeback to a bully, but the truth is that words do hurt. Even while we admire the resolve of the one being harmed, we can’t deny that words have power.

² “Why John Lewis spent his 21st birthday in jail.” <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/02/20/john-lewis-civil-rights-movement.cnn>

³ Ephesians is a “disputed” letter of Paul, meaning it is attributed to him (Eph. 1:1), but the distinctive style, word choice, and particular viewpoints suggest a later dating and different authorship.

This passage from Ephesians is full of imperative verbs—commands—that urge those who are in community with one another to live in a certain way. We are encouraged to follow some behaviors and avoid others.

The series of interlocking imperatives

- Put away falsehood. Speak the truth.
- Be angry, but do not sin.
- Build up
- Live in love.

. . . this series of interlocking imperatives may not be a single, pithy statement as concise as a one-sentence wisdom saying, but may we be guided by them and rely on them for the way they recognize the honesty and complexity of ethical living.

- Can we with courage speak the truth?
- Are we motivated to build up rather than tear down and do our words reflect that?
- May we be imitators of the love of God, a love which we know in Jesus, who gave himself for us.