

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Ephesians 4: 25-5:2
“A Christians To-Be List.”
12th Sunday after Pentecost
August 16, 2015

Today’s Scripture lesson is from Paul’s Letter to the Church at Ephesus.

I will begin by acknowledging that not all scholars agree that Paul was the actual writer of Ephesians. But it’s awkward to keep saying “the author of Ephesians” for the span of the entire sermon, so I’m going to go with Paul.

Whether or not, Paul or someone else wrote Ephesians, it is helpful to keep the larger context of the entire letter in mind. Ephesians is about the work of God to create one community from a disparate group of Jews and Gentiles. One metaphor which Paul uses to describe community is a body, specifically, Christ’s body. In today’s reading, listen for how Paul draws upon this metaphor in the first verse where he reminds his readers that “we are members one of another.”(4:25) Listen also for Paul’s use of the metaphor of a building when he emphasizes “what is useful for building up.” (4: 29)

Both of these metaphors point to how individual Christians are called to reflect the grace of God in Christ and to benefit the community as a whole through their daily behavior. (1)

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School is starting, and that means....to-do lists.

Lists of school supplies.

Lists of stuff to buy so that your dorm room can sparkle with decorator glam worthy of a spread in HGTV magazine.

Grocery lists that include cheese sticks, carrot sticks, and celery sticks for brand new not-yet-sticky-with-juice-box-residue lunch boxes.

Lists entered in smartphone apps, scribbled on the backs of envelopes, and tacked on the door of your fridge.

One might be tempted to read these verses from Ephesians as Paul’s to-do list for Christians.

Such a designation would not be far off the mark.

Indeed, Paul’s list contains a great deal of moral advice that can be found in many places in the ancient world. In this sense, there is nothing original in this text. What distinguishes Paul’s lists from other similar lists lies in the motivation for the morality. Paul’s framework, implicit though it may be, is baptism. (2)

Paul writes of how Christians has been marked with a seal of redemption. This seal of redemption is baptism. And it is this framework of baptism which enables us to view Paul’s moral instructions not so much as a to-do list, but rather as a *to-be list*.

I, for one, am appreciative of those scholars who point us toward redefining Ephesians’ moral instruction in this manner. To define moral instruction as a to-do list would be, on the one hand, to drive us to despair because we can’t possibly live by so exacting a list, or, on the other hand, to tempt us into self-righteousness because we think that we have made it if we are able to check off the items one by one. (3)

And so, with the freedom and joy that comes from viewing Paul’s instructions through the lens of baptism and our baptismal identity as God’s beloved children, let us look more closely at three items on the Christian to-be list.

The three items are these: instruction about truthful speech, instruction about dealing with anger, and instruction about our relationship with money and material possessions. I will speak of each of these instructions in turn, and following each instruction, we will sing a stanza of the spiritual, “Lord, I Want to Be A Christian,” modified to reinforce the particular item on the Christian to-be list.

First, there is instruction regarding speech.

“So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members one of another.”

Paul calls Christians to speak the truth to one another. And, surely the church ought to be the school, if you will, where we learn how to speak difficult truths about ourselves and about our world. This speaking the truth can be a slippery thing, however. Often, we are rather skilled in using the self-justifying excuse of “speaking the truth” as a cover for our efforts to manipulate, retaliate, and tear down others. (4)

There is a church in suburban Atlanta, profiled by Carol Howard Merritt in the most recent issue of *The Christian Century*, which is intentionally attempting to model how to speak the truth to one another in light of the gracious truth about our God who has redeemed us.

When Bec Cranford-Smith graduated from seminary, she figured she would go to Atlanta and start a congregation in the urban center. But Margaret Aymer at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary challenged her: “Why go to the city?” Aymer asked. “There are enough new churches there. Why not plant a church in the suburbs, where you’re from?”

Cranford-Smith didn’t want to go back to Douglasville, Georgia, a suburb 20 miles from Atlanta, where Baptists and Pentecostals populate the religious landscape. She had been hurt by her conservative upbringing and had been asked to leave the Assemblies of God denomination because of her feminism and her inclusive stance toward LGBTQ friends, among other things. Yet Aymer’s question haunted her. “Jesus had been hijacked,” she thought. “We needed to reclaim Jesus from the nationalistic, homophobic agenda.” With that realization, Cranford-Smith knew she needed to go back to create a space for people to process their own religious rejections and wounds. With her husband, Terry Cranford-Smith, and the Disciples of Christ denomination, she worked on creating Church of the Misfits, which meets not only in her hometown but on her porch.

The church tried meeting in a bar, but it wasn’t welcoming for children and those in recovery. The group gathered in a traditional church building, but that setting was difficult for those trying to heal from negative religious experiences. They felt comfortable on Cranford-Smith’s ranch-style home.

Home is a safe place for conversation and laughter. Early Christ followers often gathered in small spaces and in homes,” she said. But gathering at her home gets difficult when the group grows to over 50 people.

As might be expected with a church named Church of the Misfits, the community is not of like mind. Its members have begun to reach out to people on the margins of congregational life—people with varying sexual orientations, those differently abled, and independent thinkers who had been thrown out of another congregation.

Though Cranford-Smith was warned that the church shouldn’t be a 12-step meeting every week, it does try to be a place where people process their hurts. When I asked how that healing occurred at Church of the Misfits, Cranford-Smith said, “We begin to heal the moment we share our story.”

The church has two rules: (1) Every voice matters, and (2) Don’t be a jerk.

During the sermon, someone preaches for seven to ten minutes, then there are seven to ten minutes of community reflection. People tell stories over the Eucharist and respond through art. (5)

The church has two rules:

(1) Every voice matters.

(2) Don’t be a jerk.

This is the updated version of what Paul writes in verse 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.”

In this spirit, let us sing together “Lord, I want to be more truthful in my heart.”

The second item on Paul’s to-be list concerns anger. He writes, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”

In some highly sentimental versions of the Christian faith, it is preached that any type of anger is a sin. However, anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of the Bible can see that it is a book acquainted with anger. The prophets can hardly contain their outrage at the ways that God’s people violate God’s gracious covenant with them. The Psalmist shakes a fist at God on multiple occasions. Jesus was angry when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple. Readers can imagine the veins in Paul’s neck bulging out as he bears down his quill into the parchment which became the letter to the Galatian church.

Paul writes that anger has its place in the lives of Christians.

But his much stronger point is that while anger has its place in the lives of Christians, anger also has its limits. Anger can quickly become obsessive. Instead of being upset over a thoughtless word or deed, we have a tendency to make it personal in a hurry. We nurse a grudge and cook up schemes for revenge. (6) In verse 31, Paul

uses five different words that all indicate some variety of anger, perhaps in an order that suggests escalation: “bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander.” (7) These are all to be put away because when they occur the well-being of the community becomes secondary and our main purpose is simply to get even. (8)

The ultimate word that Paul offers on anger is found in the sequential and escalating list found in verse 32, with a generous heart giving way to compassion, leading toward true forgiveness. (9)

In this spirit, let us sing together, “Lord, I want to be more grace-filled in my heart.”

The third instruction in Paul’s Christian to-be list is this: “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.”

Why do Christians work?

Paul’s answer was counter-cultural in the first century, and it is even more counter-cultural today. His to-be list takes the consumerism of our society and stands it on its head. We don’t work merely to provide for ourselves and our families. We don’t work to keep up with our neighbors or to upgrade our kitchens. We don’t work so that we can buy ourselves the latest toys or send our children, stepchildren, and grandchildren to the best schools. We work so that we have something to share with other people and thus build up the whole community.(10)

Some would argue that it is impossible to live in so counter-cultural a way in 2015 in Davidson, North Carolina, and this Lake Norman community, but there is at least one person in this congregation who would disagree strenuously.

Don Coffey’s story was shared in the April issue of *Presbyterians Today*, the issue which bore the theme: Our Money Issue(s)--Money and faith: what we give, what we get, what we owe to God. (11)

Don Coffey, a retired Presbyterian minister and professor, expresses generosity using money he makes through investments in the stock market. He took early retirement from Erskine Theological Seminary in Due West, South Carolina, in 1980 to concentrate on investing. From his home in Davidson, North Carolina, Coffey follows the market daily and weighs his investment options.

While most serious investors focus on beating the market and acquiring more wealth, Coffey goes against the cultural norm. He makes money in order to give it away. Coffey begins reducing his assets through charitable giving once his stock market earnings total \$1 million. He then starts the process over again.

His motivation for giving is straightforward.

“I’ve tried to follow Jesus, who had some pretty radical things to say about what we do with our possessions,” he says. “We are stewards of what we call our own. We are not really owners. I try to be a good steward with what I have and share it with people who don’t have.”

Let us sing together: “Lord, I want to be more giving in my heart.”

In summary, Paul calls us to nothing less than a life of imitating God: “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.”

Such a call may seem absurd; to think that we could “imitate God” would seem to be the height of arrogance. And this might have merit were we to view Paul’s instructions as a to-do list. However, Paul’s to-be lists is founded on the love of Christ for us. Jesus doesn’t simply give us an example to follow by our simply gritting our teeth and trying harder and checking off every item on our spiritual to-do lists. Rather Christ cuts the path for us, and then he pulls us along.(12)

It may be significant that the imperative in Ephesians 5: 1 indicates that this imitation of God is an ongoing process. It might be more correctly translated, “Keep on becoming imitators of God,” calling to mind the words of Martin Luther, “This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way.”(13)

And so with confidence in the One in whose love we are baptized, let us sing together: “Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart.”

1. Susan Hysten, “Commentary on Ephesians 4:25-5:2,” www.workingpreacher.org, August 9, 2009.
2. Mark Tranvik, “Commentary on Ephesians 4: 25-5:2,” www.workingpreacher.org, August 12, 2012.
3. Stan Mast, Center for Excellence in Preaching, www.cep.calvinseminary.edu, August 3, 2015.
4. Brian Peterson, “Commentary on Ephesians 4: 25-5:2,” www.workingpreacher.org, August 9, 2015.

5. Carol Howard Merritt, "Misfits in the suburbs," *The Christian Century*, August 19, 2015, 45.
6. Tranvik.
7. Hylan.
8. Tranvik.
9. Hylan.
10. April Yamasaki, "Living the Word," *The Christian Century*, August 5, 2015, 20.
11. Pat Cole, "Living via giving," *Presbyterians Today*, April 2015, 24.
12. Peterson.
13. Martin Luther, "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles," translated by Charles M. Jacobs, in *Luther's Words, Volume 34* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958). 24.