
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

“Bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling,
slander, and don’t forget malice”

A Sermon by

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Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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🎵 God is still speaking,

In March 2003, I stood on the stage of the ancient theater in Ephesus (Turkey) once capable of seating 25,000 spectators with such perfect acoustics that what I read from the Book of Acts in a normal tone of voice could be heard by people even in the furthest, top back row. I stood there as part of a Steps of Paul sabbatical trip and I was reading from Acts 19, an account that describes that after Paul has been in Ephesus for about two years a “little disturbance broke out” concerning Paul’s teaching of the Way, the Way of following Jesus, the way of this new small community of people, Jews and Greeks and Gentiles, who were learning how to live as a new household, with equality and justice and non-violence and agape love.

The little disturbance was that Paul, in his new Jesus economy, was driving people like Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of the Goddess Artemis, out of business. Artemis was the goddess of forests and hills, child birth, virginity, fertility and the hunt. Her chief shrine was there, and in this city of 400,000 to 500,000 inhabitants, a Roman capital city in Asia Minor, Demetrius and his silversmith union were none too happy with their prosperity going down.

The excavations at Ephesus are splendid: the most advanced aqueduct system, major bath complexes, a library holding 12,000 scrolls. Directly across the courtyard from the Library was the Ephesus town brothel. Engravings in the marble street pavement show the way with a left foot and a woman’s figure indicating the brothel is on the left side of the road, just ahead.¹ (Good to know!) Paul left Ephesus, perhaps departing through the southeastern gate of the public forum. If he had looked up, he would have seen inscribed on the gate, the abbreviation IMP, “to the Emperor as the All-Conquering One”, Caesar Augustus, Divine, Son of God, Liberator, Redeemer, Savior of the World, justice, peace, gospel, grace, salvation, empire, Emperor, All-Conquering One.² Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book *The First Paul* say that when reading a Pauline letter, “it is wise to remember that we are reading letters never intended for us.”³ We need to first study the letter, place it within the life of the family or community, and finally locate it in the wider cultural and social matrix of the times. I would also add that we need to read the letter recognizing our North American lenses and context. It just so happened that two days after we returned from the Steps of Paul tour, “Operation Iraqi Freedom” began an invasion necessary because of the threat of weapons of mass destruction. Lenses matter.

Scholars pretty much agree that the letter to the followers of the Way in Ephesus was not written by Paul. The letter is believed to be written “post-Paul”, a generation or so after his death, and was “a taming of Paul, a domestication of Paul’s passion to the normalcy of the Roman imperial world in which Paul followers lived.”⁴ Ephesus was at its peak about 100 AD, and remained so for another hundred years. Is it possible that living that long under a ruling system that declares itself “Son of God” it becomes harder and harder to remember the man named Jesus who said, “No, I am the Son of God. Follow me.” Even though Paul may not have written it, the letter is still a letter of encouragement. “Put away your former way of life. Clothe yourself with a new self. Don’t talk evil. Don’t badmouth others. Be kind. Forgive. Live in love.” Simple, right?

¹ http://architecture.about.com/od/ancientromanempire/ss/ephesus_6.htm

² *The First Paul*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, Harper Collins, 2009, p. 101.

³ *Ibid*, p. 30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

2,000 years later, the same advice applies. 'Progressive Christianity: love one another.' Might just as well be Christianity according to Barney, the big purple dinosaur, "I love you, you love me, we are happy family."

The encourager of the community in Ephesus reminds them that they are "members of one another". They are each other's limbs. Living as a community in a hostile world: who wouldn't get angry?

Who wouldn't swear and cuss? Bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, malice. We all get that. We've all done that. But, listen, you can grow into a new identity. The great German theologian Karl Rahner once said "it's better to say that we're always becoming Christians than simply being Christians." His words suggest growing into an identity rather than achieving a static goal or earning merit badges.⁵

Our team that just returned from Nicaragua on a mission partnership trip; we don't get a merit badge for that. If anything, we received more than we gave. You'll hear more in September as the team presents their story in worship. Our primary project was to help them build their dream, of having a church building as the center of their community. But our primary goal was building relationships, beginning a relationship of mutuality and solidarity. We were invited to meet with the leaders of the community and over and over we heard how they have been praying for this dream to come true and in their minds, their church is built, although together we didn't even finish the foundation. It will happen: by faith, by working together, by putting away any malice or bad talk, by loving extravagantly.

We were the outsiders being welcomed in. We were the ones left wondering, "Wow, do I have that kind of faith?" "How can I continue to become Christian, Christ-like?"

We were there because of the generosity of many who supported us, money, prayers, donations. All needed, all accepted, all appreciated: no merit badges earned.

Generosity is our identity as we become Christ-like. In a culture like ours that equates status with wealth, what does it mean to put on a new identity that goes beyond 'charity': "I give to you if it makes me feel good about myself and I can always withhold that money if you don't spend it quite the way I want you to"...to an identity of compassion that Jesus showed: tender hearted, kindness as the foundation for our behavior. "It was Plato who said we should "be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."⁶

Maybe this was what the writer to the church in Ephesus was trying to say. We are all fighting a hard battle. I am. You are. This church is. When our lives can change in a single moment. In the midst of fighting the hard battle of life, we care called to be imitators of God, all of us together.

One of my home visits this week was to a woman who has gone into a Care Center for some loving care. She told me this story and said I could share it. All these years she has lived in her home, her two neighbors on either side of her have quarreled, not with her, but with each other and she has literally been caught in the middle. When she came to the Care Center, they started caring for her

⁵ <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/send-to-friend.jsp?pid=10748635&itemID=40320414>

⁶ <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/august-9-2009-tenth-sunday-14.html>

house, watering, and watching things. They are working together, for the first time, seemingly forgetting all that malice, all that anger, all the bitterness and wrangling.

What simple words the encouraging letter says, “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger.” What if at the end of every day, and the beginning of the next day, we sat down and thanked God, thanked the Universe, for everything the day brought us. Everything.

Would not our lives be transformed, like Paul’s was, and would we not live our lives for a God, self-emptied and incarnate in Jesus, a God passionate not about power and control, but about justice and peace, a God who believed in distributive justice and nonviolence. This is the mind followers of Jesus are to have. It was a mind that would cost Paul his life.⁷

I have said for a long time now I do not want to die a bitter person. I have seen that: bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, malice. That is not life to me. Life to me is learning a life of love. Some days I am better at it than other days. Some days I want to earn the merit badges for love. Then I remember, again, Christ did not love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. I want to love like that.
Amen.

⁷ The First Paul, p. 213.