

YearB-Pentecost12-proper 14-Living from the Future

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Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Living from the Future

During this past year both Laura and I have had physical challenges. We couldn't do many things that we like to do but we look forward to doing them when our bodies heal. In our imagination we have been living from the future. Next year, when we are better, we will do what we can't do now and our spirits lift.

The text we are about to explore from Ephesians does the same; it reminds us to live our lives in view of the enormity of God's generosity that is coming toward us already and coming in its fullness one day in the future. Given that reality held in faith, the writer of Ephesians gives us some tips for redeeming the time as we wait.

The writer starts, "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another."

Ah, shucks, what's so bad about falsehood? Just think of all the things we could do if we weren't shackled to truth. And lying protects people from truth that might hurt them, right? Lying makes it more likely that what's right will happen in the world, right? Lying allows us to adapt to changing circumstances, right? Everyone lies, right? So we have to too, right?

Here are some questions that occurred to me as I studied this: Is the writer here talking about just the church, the group of people meeting together in Ephesus who follow Jesus or should this be taken in a wider context? What does it mean to speak the truth to our neighbor? Would that mean admitting that we too are sinners, putting ourselves on the same level as everyone else? What does it mean to put away falsehood? Does this imply there is much falsehood in human speech already?

I ask myself, how many of my words are driven by my sin; that is by my desire to win in my rivalry with my neighbor? How many sentences have sacrificing the other built into them so cleverly that I don't notice? Going along with my culture, I throw some under the bus so that I can maintain an identity other than as a child of God. I do this without thinking.

Language regularly hides truth. For example, our government used to call its most powerful ICBM "a peacemaker". It didn't make peace; it threatened to destroy the world. Postmodern philosophers know now that language hides but they don't know what to do to fix it.

In the modern era that ended around 1960 we assumed without question that father knew best; the government, if a liberal democracy, had our best interest at heart, and advertisers would never knowingly sell us products that would hurt us. But a number of events challenged such naïve views. During the Vietnam War we discovered our leaders knew it was unwinnable long before they admitted it to us. Thousands of our own were lost. We discovered cigarettes really do harm us. Manufacturers knew it but kept it hidden. Now they know about the harm so they focus on selling cigarettes internationally. Meanwhile they addict our youth through electronic cigarettes they say are not as harmful. The research contradicts them. These are but a few disappointments we have experienced in relation to those we trusted.

In addition, a deeper awareness of a new/old truth has silently and quickly spread throughout the world, leveraged by social media. It's "a new/old and deeper truth" because it is something Jesus revealed from the cross that has gradually changed human awareness like yeast changes dough. We are now more aware than ever that the enemy we kill or maim is just like us—fully human, with family who love them, and as caught as we are in systems of violence. There are no unhuman monsters out there. It's all a game of king of the mountain and the mountain is owned by a small percentage of the world's financial elite who demand our youth keep charging the hill. More and more of our soldiers are returning with serious PTSD and the suicide rates may exceed those killed in combat.

In view of this dark history, let's revisit the author's initial words. "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors." Maybe we can't make the world speak the truth but we can speak it ourselves as best we can. And where our common language has become poisoned by falsehoods hidden in the way we think and speak, we can examine our words and search out what is false. Much of the education available on racism, sexism and other consciousness-raising programs help us with this. Finally, we can learn to see the world the way our neighbor sees it even though we know they too are in error. We need each other to sort truth and discern reality, for, as the writer says "we are members of one another."

There is a whole list of these tips. "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil." Anger is an emotion while sin is an action characterized by violence and the desire to do harm.

Recently a rock broke the windshield on our son's car on his way to work. He was angry that it had happened but he did not sin since he made no action toward violence. He told me about it, including his feeling and I urged him to be angry and let it go as soon as he could so as to not mess up his day. Had he dwelled in his anger, taking it out on those around him or himself, it would have compounded his frustration and led to violence against the innocent.

Here is one that surprised me. “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.” First, it suggests that active thieves had become part of the Jesus following community in Ephesians. That stretches our boundaries. Thieves often justify their actions by saying those they steal from have much and they are justified in taking what they want. They must stop, get to work with their hands, make and save money “so as to have something to share with the needy.” It’s the last phrase that surprises me. The writer asks thieves to cease taking and begin sharing with those who really are needy. What better way to heal the hurt inside than working to heal others.

Verse 29 says “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.” What is evil talk? Does it contain words that excite toward violence? Does it imply the other is stupid, lazy, dirty, or criminal so as to turn the listener against them? Does it suggest the speaker is right and the other is wrong without paying close attention to the other’s description of things?

To approach it from the positive side, do the words we speak prove useful for building up as there is need. Not false flattery but genuine encouragement toward reconciliation, contentment and security.

Finally: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” We are learning to do that more and more. I see it in the way we greet each other; hugs, smiles, handshakes, and even kisses. We don’t feel ashamed to be tenderhearted in our hardening world. We are less likely to wrangle and slander and more likely to forgive as we have been forgiven. Led by our Lord Jesus Christ we are moving in the direction of being kind to one another and kind in how we think about our brothers and sisters of all faiths and no faith at all throughout the world. More and more we are living from the future. There couldn’t be a better place to live from. Thanks be to God. Amen.