

Ephesians 4:25-5:2
Rev. Mitzi Lesher-Thomas

Aug. 12, 2018

We've all seen some version of this picture -- dual images captioned 'expectation' versus 'reality.' It's the cute little angel baby, knees tucked to chin, sleeping soundly on a cloudlike bit of fluff versus the squalling, flailing, all arms and legs newborn; the neat-as-a-pin house complete with mom in heels and quiet, pristine children versus the dishes in the sink, handprints on the wall, mom in yoga pants, "would someone take the trash out, please"; or some of my favorites the darling baked goods and snacks that look like pandas and teddy bears and unicorns versus the rainbow hued lumps and blobs surely edible if not photogenic.

The first 4 chapters of Ephesians is Paul's rambling version of expectation versus reality – fairly gushing with optimism in the versus we heard last week, Paul says we're blessed to be a blessing; Christ has made us one – breaking down the dividing walls between us to create one new humanity; making peace, reconciling us to each another. As I read it I thought "it's the wordy version of airbrushing! God in Christ may have broken down the dividing wall between us but that doesn't mean we're not all still standing in our respective corners, arms crossed staring at each other across the rubble. God can make us one humanity

but we don't have to like it! God can even reconcile us to each other – but like children made to say sorry – doesn't mean we like each other or want to share our toys – never mind actually seeing God in each other.

No wonder Paul says, “don't worry about how hard you're making this on me...but I beg you...lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called!”

God may have handled all the demolition work – but we're supposed to be putting in some sweat equity hours; we're supposed to be rolling up our sleeves, up to our elbows learning how to live with each other; figuring out how to embrace our differences; exploring the emotion and frustration created by the messiness that comes with life in community.

These verses are meant to be guidelines for life – not entirely unlike the shelves of books or endless memes all labeled as 'self-help' all offering ideas like: don't go to bed angry; when you let your anger get the best of you it brings out the worst in you; we don't have to agree on anything to be kind to one another; be sure to taste your words before you spit them out. This is good stuff! So we write it on post-it's and stick it on our bathroom mirrors or hang them on our walls in pretty frames. But Paul has no interest in self-help guides. Paul is calling us to be a part of one another's lives, building one another up in a community of

mutuality. These instructions are not meant for us as *individuals* rather they are meant to guide us as *members of a community* that is the body of Christ. We are to be a unified body of individuals, an *interacting* population of *various* kinds of individuals – thank you Merriam Webster’s – but, did you hear that -- we have to interact with one another, with our various life experiences, our different ways of being in the world, our varied perspectives, preferences and ideas. That’s what this means! It’s not just tolerating or making room for or putting up with – it’s shaping a family.

And not just within the comfort and familiarity of these walls. It starts here, to be sure, church is to be the place where many different people can come together, where differences are valued and we promote each other’s worth – and it is easier said than done. But if we practice, and pray and work at it here – then maybe the walls and borders and boundaries we erect between us – whether literal or the ones we name as race, or religion, or political party, generation or sexuality won’t seem so insurmountable, and maybe the divides that fracture our world won’t seem so deep. And maybe, just maybe we’ll stop assigning blame long enough to take responsibility, hear Paul’s words and take them to heart – that it’s not about any *one* of us, (but about how we as a community build one another up.)

We are made for community, made for each other, “In the beginning” God said, “it is not good for man to live alone.” So we *have* to figure out how to live *with* – how to live *for* each other. And Paul’s advice, you could call them the 10 commandments of the New Testament, will rival any self-help book.

They’re powerful guidelines for how to live in community – and step one is acknowledging we have a responsibility to and for each other. It seems so basic, but without even realizing it we are increasingly isolating ourselves from each other. Texting has replaced emails which replaced phone calls; self-checkout is ubiquitous; pay at the pump gas stations with video entertainment is the norm; online classes and shopping online with delivery for everything from toilet paper to paper clips. Don’t get me wrong – I have whole conversations via text; don’t recall when I last darkened the door of a shopping mall and I love self-checkout. But I’m also aware we’ve created a world where we interact more with keyboards than each other. It feeds the myth that it really is all about us, that we’re self-made individuals who can take care of ourselves. Is it any wonder we’ve forgotten how to look each other in the eye and really see one another. Is it any wonder we can be so careless with our words if we’re not in the habit of looking at each other as we speak them and seeing someone take them in – seeing their faces and bodies respond to what their ears hear.

Paul's instructions are more than memes or pithy sayings – in a world where it's rare to look one another in the eye, and words are texted, tweeted, and posted without regard for how or where they land -- if we could heed Paul's advice, then perhaps the contrast between expectation and reality wouldn't be so stark.

So let's put away the pretenses and false narratives about each other – not all Southerners like sweet tea and not everyone in Cary is a Yankee.

And let's speak the truth to our neighbors – let's admit that sometimes we're afraid of our differences and really we want uniformity more than unity, 'cause we can't get past it if we're not honest about it.

When we're angry – yes, Christians get angry too don't let anyone tell you otherwise, it's poor theology – let's not waste the energy pointing fingers, or on petty tit-for-tat antics that deepen the divide. That energy can become an opportunity for reflection and change.

Stealing hurts the community – not only because it's taking what wasn't ours – but because when we're so focused on filling our own selfish desires by hook or by crook we are not able to help others.

THINK before we speak (and I admit this is a meme I saw, but it's really good) – is it **true**, is it **helpful**, is it **inspiring**, is it **necessary**, is it **kind** – some

childhood lessons have ageless appeal – we’ve got to use our words for building one another up in love.

“Don’t grieve God. Don’t break God’s heart. The Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in us, is the most intimate part of our life. Let’s not take it for granted.”

¹

Let go of bitterness; be kind; be tenderhearted; forgive as we have been forgiven, loved and freed. To paraphrase Eugene Peterson from The Message in the last few verses...

Watch what God does, and then do it, like children who learn proper behavior from watching others. Mostly what God does is love us. Keep company with God and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. Not cautiously but extravagantly, not in order to get something from us but to give us abundant life. Love like that.²

Not only can we be one – but maybe our reality can match not just *our* expectations – but the hopes and dreams of the God who made us in the beginning.

¹ Paraphrase from Eugene Peterson The Message Ephesians 4:30

² Paraphrase from Eugene Peterson The Message Ephesians 5: 1-2