

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Rooted and Grounded in Love: Finding Our Way”

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Isaiah 57:14-24

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

We weren't exactly lost. But we weren't exactly found either. My partner and I were at Boy Scout camp and we were learning about orienteering. Orienteering is that skill where one uses a map and a compass to find one's way from point "A" to point "B". I think that I might have been able to do, and in fact have done it since while backpacking in Colorado. However, this time we were at a scout camp where there were no maps. So what we were given was a set of instructions that we were to go so many feet in one direction, change course and go so many feet in another direction...and you get the point. Not only did we have to know how to use the compass, we also had to know how to measure distances. And...as most of you can imagine, it didn't take more than one mistake...not walk the right distance, get off course a couple of degrees and it was all over and you were lost. In the end the best thing about it was that the Scout camp was small enough that we would not starve to death trying to find our way back to camp.

In some ways I have always seen that event as a metaphor for the Christian life. In the Christian life we are given some very basic directions. I say basic directions because Jesus never gave us a step by step set of instructions for exactly what we are to do in every circumstance. He did not give us an ethical Garmin that will tell us exactly how to respond in every instance. Instead he taught his disciples with parables, such as the one about the Kingdom of God being like a mustard seed. He taught with aphorisms, short pithy statements such as if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; not one we like to remember. Jesus taught by example, he forgave his enemies. Jesus taught with stories, such as the Good Samaritan. Then Jesus, by calling disciples and saying, follow me, became the compass. He became the one whose life and death were to be the guiding star, if you will, for our lives. So we are supposed to make our way in a very complex world using a few basic teachings with Jesus as the compass. As many of us will admit, while all of this is helpful, it is not foolproof.

I say this because the church has clearly demonstrated that two different people can, to the best of their ability, read the same passage, follow the same Jesus and end up in two very different places. One of the great examples of this is the place of women in the leadership of the church. Even within the Presbyterian tradition people differ in their understandings of this issue. In our denomination, the PCUSA, women are ordained as ministers, elders and deacons. In the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, which was started at Ward Presbyterian Church, the ordination of women is local option. Individual churches and presbyteries (local governing bodies) each decide for themselves. In the Presbyterian Church in America women are not ordained to any positions and in some churches are not even allowed to teach classes in which men are present. In other words just like all of the scouts at camp had the exact same set of instructions, many of us ended up in very different places.

We would think then that someone in the scriptures would give us a much clearer set of directions so that we would not be lost as we made our way through the world. And if there ought to be one person who would do that, it would be the Apostle Paul. After all Paul was a Pharisee, a group of people who were known for their almost infinite set of rules and regulations that governed almost every possible event in life. Yet when we turn to Paul, we don't really find that. Instead we find the same sort of basic, but not overly specific, set of instructions. Our morning's text is a perfect example. Paul appears to give us, what some might call, good folk wisdom. He offers us the same advice that my wife and I got on our wedding day from Cindy's grandfather. He took us aside and said that we were never to go to bed angry with one another. Little did I know that Paul had essentially given people that same advice two-thousand years ago. We are told that we are not to steal....duh. That is a rule in every culture and society. We are told not to lie...and well, you get the point. These are sort of folk norms. Surely Paul could do better than that...and in actuality he does. For in fact this short pithy section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, while not giving us an exact play by play script for our lives, offers us a set of directions that ought to give us great clarity in the choices we make. And Paul does so by pointing us away from one kind of life, and toward another. Let me explain.

Paul points us away from a life which diminishes, demeans and dominates others. Listen again to the list of those things we are not supposed to do. We are not supposed to lie, to be angry, to steal, to speak evil of others, to be bitter, to carry out wrath, to slander and to be malicious. While these may all appear to be things we were taught not to do in kindergarten, they actually all have a single common factor; they are intended to destroy and diminish the image of God in another person. Speaking evil of and slandering someone takes away a piece of their integrity just as surely as stealing takes away a physical good. Lying not only breaks relationships, it says the other person is not worthy of knowing the truth. And being angry...well I have decided that being angry is now America's favorite pastime. This week I watched as two people in the Kroger parking lot yelled at each other over a close call with their cars. No damage was done. No one was hurt, but they had to try and diminish the other with anger and accusations. Again, Paul tells us that this is the life from which we ought to be moving away.

Paul next points us to a life which enhances the value and worth of others. Listen to his list. We are to speak the truth, we are to make amends if we have been angry, we are to work honestly...so that we can give to those in need, we are to build up others with our words, we are to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving and to love as Jesus loved. In other words we are to be those whose life not only sees the other as being valuable but builds up the other by the way they are treated. Telling someone the truth implies they are worthy of receiving it. To make amends implies that the other is worth being in a relationship with. Building up others with our words means the other is worthy of being encouraged. Being kind, tenderhearted and forgiving says that the other has worth and value, and that we need to acknowledge that with our actions. Finally, loving like Jesus loved, says those around us are worth sacrificing for. This is the kind of life toward which we ought to be moving; one in which the image of God in others is being allowed to shine more and more through our actions.

For more than half of my life I have studied this book (the Bible) and have come to three fundamental conclusions. The first is that every human being has been made in the image of God and

because of that we have intrinsic worth and value. The second conclusion is that God wants to redeem every human being; redeem them from hunger, fear, addiction, pain, war and violence. The third is that our lives are to be lived as those who are agents of redemption. This is what I believe that Paul is telling us. This is the direction in which Paul is pointing us. And it becomes a good measuring stick for our lives. As we come home each day, or as we reflect on our interactions with others, we can ask ourselves, am I moving in the right direction? Have my words and deeds been used to enhance or diminish the image of God in others? In what direction am I moving? Am I truly reflecting the love and grace of God in how I interact with and treat others? So that is my challenge for you for this week...and I hope for a long time to come. To ask yourselves, on a daily basis, in what direction am I headed, and does it reflect God's desire to redeem all people so that they know that they are created in the image of God?