

Let Go of the Outrage
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Ephesians 4:25-5:2

In the wake of a couple of manufactured controversies that have cropped up around the Olympics, there's been a cartoon making the rounds online which more or less captures how absurd these teapot-sized tempests. In this cartoon, two people are looking at something on a cell phone, when one screams at the other, "They're mocking the Last Supper! Did you know there's a MAN in WOMEN'S boxing?!" Both times, the other person looking on calmly replies with facts. The scene in question depicted a feast of Dionysos, the Greek god of wine and revelry, not the Last Supper. The boxer in question is, in fact, a woman, who'd had the misfortune of being mysteriously disqualified from an event last year by its Russian organizer (after having defeated... another Russian), and whose participation in the Games the IOC enthusiastically supported. The shouter then gets so angry the veins on his forehead pop out. In the last panel, he says, "Well, hang on – I'm sure I can find SOMETHING to be outraged about!"¹

The cartoon is meant to point out two things. One is the absurdity of so-called conspiracy theories, which are nearly always easily disproven with the calm reporting of actual facts. The second is the penchant we all seem to have developed in recent years for being outraged at anything and anyone around us who doesn't seem to fit our definition of "acceptable." The outrage is only fueled by the ubiquity of the Internet and 24/7 cable news channels which encourage us to panic first and find the actual, hard

¹ https://www.reddit.com/r/HumorInPoorTaste/comments/1ek4l86/the_party_of_outrage_porn/#lightbox [accessed August 8, 2024].

facts second. They can be quite addictive, and just like any other addictive substance, they easily pull us into their orbit and lie to us to keep us there... and make themselves very difficult to part with in the process.

Hanging onto anger in the way this cartoon describes is not only unhealthy for our bodies, but also says a lot more about us than it does anything else. Mainly it communicates to the people around us that we're not feeling great about ourselves, and perhaps our place in the world. More than that, living in a constant state of outrage-fueled anxiety is also destructive. We've kind of been watching that happen in real time over the past fifteen years or so. It seems like there is always something happening to send us on an anxiety trip that has us wanting to strangle our neighbors, whether it's what our elected leaders are up to, something culturally based that we're supposed to take offense at, or a global pandemic - and not one of you who's brought it up in conversation with me has liked it.

It is precisely this sort of ratcheting up of emotion that the writer of Ephesians is pushing against with the exhortation to "be angry, but do not sin." This nugget of practical advice comes at the end of a chapter which reminds us that Jesus, and our baptisms in to his body, the Church, have change as their chief consequence. There's been quite a bit of discussion among theologians over the centuries about what exactly that change entails. What they agree on is that it somehow grafts us onto the tree that is the Body of Christ; it removes sin; and it is the vehicle by which we become full participants in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Those changes also come with the requirement to change our outward behavior. Besides not holding onto anger, we are to:

- tell the truth;
- work so that someone else can have resources, too;
- refrain from speaking evil
- try our best not to grieve the Holy Spirit (where "grieve" means "disappoint");
- put away bitterness and wrath – that is, don't hold grudges;
- and, last of all, to walk in love as Christ himself did.

Doing these things effectively connects our faith in Christ to "real life" lived in community. The bottom line is that our dependence upon one another requires us both to treat each other with dignity, and to cooperate for the good of all. And we cannot live into that truth fully if we're doing the, well, very human things of being less than honest with others and ourselves, letting our distaste for someone else's behavior smolder, and failing to have love be the basis of how we treat everyone we come across. According to the writer, this is all the "old stuff," that is, what we did BEFORE we came to faith. We were perhaps helpless, and definitely disconnected when it came to being in relationship with God and God's people... and that is detailed in the few verses just prior to where our passage picks up: "You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another" (Ephesians 4:22-25, NRSV).

Living out the faith we confess requires a change. It starts with letting go of the anger which leads to sinful actions against others, and holding grudges. "Such actions and attitudes only open the door for the destructive schemes of the devil... Similarly, theft does not just involve taking something that belongs to another. Such theft robs another the ability of using their skills to produce what can also be shared with those in need... Likewise, what we say to each other directly impacts our relationships with each other as joint members of the body of Christ. Thus... we are being called upon to speak to each other in ways which enhance our relational bonds steeped in God's grace rather than in ways which corrode these bonds."²

It's a fact that living in community is hard. It's also a fact that one of the things that makes it hard is when we behave in ways that run counter to what's required of us as a people who have been baptized into the life and death of Jesus Christ. And that, in and of itself, is also hard, because – guess what – we're human. We're susceptible to getting irritated by each other, not telling the truth, and getting angry about it. There's not a ton of antidotes available for that, except learning how to be self-aware enough to know when we're about to cross the line, and being able to forgive, and ask for forgiveness when we treat someone poorly.

Ephesians does not, unfortunately, provide much in the way of helpful hints about *how* to live into this series of "do this, not that" suggestions for being together as the Church. That's why we have documents like St. Benedict's Rule for monastic communities to help fill in the gaps. They take what Jesus taught, and how Paul and the

² Richard Carlson, "Commentary on Ephesians 4:25-5:2." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-19-2/commentary-on-ephesians-425-52-5> [accessed August 5, 2024].

other writers of the Epistles interpreted those teachings, and use them to help define how communities should deal with everything from how to allocate food to handling serious conflicts. It's also a gift in this place to have some great role models among us to serve as guides and examples, especially when reading a book about how we should treat each other doesn't go quite far enough. The only thing I would add to their wisdom is this: unplug. Turn off the TV, put down your cell phone, and go have an actual conversation. You might be surprised how much less outraged you feel about the state of the world... and at what you discover in the other people around you.