

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
Woodhaven Presbyterian Church
August 9, 2009: 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Ephesians 4:25-5:2

What Did You Say to Me?

I must begin by addressing what those of us in the office have seen every day this week. Every day, beginning last Sunday, we have watched a steady parade of Woodhaven members and friends carrying in boxes and bags full of food. It has been incredible to see. We mentioned to you how we needed food for the increasing numbers of people coming to the church needing assistance. And in typical WPC fashion, you immediately responded with overwhelming generosity.

Some of you have brought can openers for those who are living in their cars. Others of you bagged up individual sack lunches, ready to go with treats for kids. One family had the great idea of buying some stuff in bulk that we can fix and freeze so it will be ready to be distributed whenever it is needed. All of you have had a particular strategy that you employed. And your strategic thinking has been a powerful witness to me this week.

I have been moved not only by the fact that you responded by bringing food, but that you thought specifically about what kind of food to bring. So many of you tried to put yourself in the shoes of a person living without the benefit of a kitchen or electricity, or someone who might not have another meal for a while after eating ours. And then, you thought about what you would find most helpful in that situation. You have been very intentional with all of this and have taken the time to consider the **person**, the brother or sister in Christ, who was in need, instead of only thinking about the “**issues**” of hunger or poverty. You have made it a family thing.

The writer of Ephesians would have been proud of you. For one of the primary concerns of this letter to the church at Ephesus was how they, as a congregation, were living out their new life in Christ. How were they, as a part of Christ’s body, putting flesh on their baptismal vows? How well were they taking off the garment of their old lives, lives that had been lived before the knowledge of God’s gracious claiming of them in Christ, and putting on the new garments of baptismal identity? How were they doing at living as imitators of God, as God’s beloved children?

In the section of the letter I read a few moments ago, you heard a lot about what that new life looks like in the community of faith. It looks like people who share. It looks like people who act kindly to one another. It looks like people who are honest about their anger but who are also honest about God’s call to forgive and be reconciled. Frankly, the new life looks a lot like members of a church who bring in boxes and bags of food as soon as they hear there is need. A congregation who sees the term “need” as people with faces, instead of just as an impersonal headline in the news. Those are some of the visual reflections of what the new life in Christ looks like when it is given flesh and lives in community. But as we see in the letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul was not only concerned with how the new life in Christ **looked**. He also wanted to help the church hear how the new life in Christ **sounded**. Listen again: *“Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors for we are members of one another... 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.”*

Paul was claiming for the Ephesians that their new life in Christ, their new baptismal garb, did not only affect their actions and what they did with their bodies. Their new baptismal life also affected their very words and the way they spoke with one another as members of the same family, Christ’s family.

According to this letter, not only did their bodies and their actions get wet in their baptisms, but so did their speech. The very words they used with one another also needed to be dipped first into the baptismal font before being spoken out loud. For as the body of Christ, they were called to be imitators of God, God's beloved children. And that baptismal call was to soak deeply into all that they did **and** said.

Last Monday, I sent my husband Greg a quick text message. It was nothing of any importance, just a reminder about something. I did not get a response but I did not think anything about it because we saw each other shortly after I sent it. The next morning, however, I woke up to some strange text message on my cell phone. I did not know the number from whence it came, though I did notice that coincidentally, it was just one number off from Greg's phone number. I did not respond to it, assuming that it was a mistake. But then, I got another message. And this one was rather inappropriate.

I decided to just write a quick "You have the wrong number. Please stop texting me" note. Immediately, I got another message. And this time, the language was even more crude and disconcerting. The author asked why, then, had I sent him a message the night before? All of the sudden, it hit me. I had accidentally sent him the innocuous message I thought I was sending Greg – remember, the number was just one number off. So I thought to myself – well, I will just let him know that was a mistake. I am sure that will take care of it. I wrote back "I am sorry. I meant to send that message to my husband. Please take care."

I tried to be as gracious as I could be in order to cut off the communication. My strategy did not work. He sent me an even more insulting message back. My first response when I got that last message was to set him straight and really let him have it because I was fed up with the way he was speaking to me.

And then, two thoughts immediately came to my mind. The first one was, "Are you crazy? Don't encourage him." But the second one was even more admonishing to me. "*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 it.*" I had just read this Scripture from Ephesians the day before and it was still rattling around in my soul. Needless to say, after that tapping on the shoulder from the Spirit, I did not send anything else and all communication ceased.

But, truth be told, it would have been a little satisfying to have spoken strongly and rebuked that anonymous person. For a few moments, I am sure that I would have felt powerful in my ability to use my own words to wound someone who had insulted me. But when I came face to face with this letter in Scripture, I had to ask myself if using words that wounded would be any kind of reflection of my new life in Christ. How would a hateful response from me be any kind of imitation of God? You know as well as I do that it would not be. If anything, the act of using words that wound is a reflection of the old garment and the world around us.

Just read letters to the editor in the newspaper, or even, letters to the editor of church publications. Listen to political talk radio shows on both sides of the political spectrum. Watch the news these days as the Town Hall meetings take place. Read Facebook postings or mass emails that get forwarded around. When you do any of those things, you will find that speaking in ways that purposefully wound is a popular form of speech in our country. The speech of our world has become speech that tears down, divides, wounds, and demeans. And it is speech that we, as imitators of God, God's beloved children, part of the body of Christ, are challenged to resist using.

Now, let's stop here and get clear about what this letter does **not** say to us. This letter does not claim we cannot be angry with one another. This letter also does not claim that we have to agree all the time. Finally, this letter does not call us to only speak in false niceties or to deny the complexities of our communal life together and the shadows that linger. We are to talk honestly about those places in our life, in the life of our country, and in our congregational life where we need God's direction or God's healing or simply God's tangible presence. We do not need to deny where we are broken nor do we need to be dishonest about how we truly feel. These words from Ephesians do not call us to be mealy-mouthed.

But these words from Ephesians do remind us that even when we are angry, as imitators of God, God's beloved children, we shall not speak to wound. Even when we disagree, as imitators of God, God's beloved children, we shall not speak to demean. Even when we acknowledge our messiness, as imitators of God, God's beloved children, we shall not slander or be divisive. Rather, we are called to be clear about the power of the words we use and how we use them with each other and with all people in God's world. And then to be responsible with that power.

Finally, these words from Ephesians also remind us that living out our baptismal identities does not just happen. It does not come easily. Taking off the old garments and putting on the new, acting in ways that build up the body, developing a habit of speech with one another that offers grace, is all hard work. It takes practice. It takes the same kind of intentionality that you showed while shopping for our food pantry. It takes seeing the "other" as a person and not as a headline, or a need, or an issue, or an enemy.

These words from Ephesians offer us, as imitators of God, God's beloved children, a way of living and being with one another that is starkly different than the way of living still wrapped in the garments of this world. These words from Ephesians challenge us to not only think about our discipleship in terms of what we do or don't do, but also in terms of what we say and how we say it.

"Only use words that offer grace. Only make comments that build up. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you."

All of who we are has been, or is preparing, to be dipped in the baptismal waters, soaked through and through with Christ's saving grace. So may we take courage from that knowledge and from one another and may we continue to live in ways that reflect **whose** we are. Amen.