

Keep God Smiling

Ephesians 4:25-52
September 5, 2021

First Presbyterian Church
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Several weeks ago as I was up here highlighting the week's announcements, Apple's computer-generated, virtual assistant named Siri spoke to me from the congregation. I think she told me to speak up and repeat what I had said. Siri was obviously listening to me from inside somebody's pocket, and we had some fun laughing about that.

But what's not fun is when someone acts like a robot and thoughtlessly says things to you that are hurtful. Even worse is when you say nasty things to someone else, because that really eats away at us, being mean and nasty, negative and critical.

This was the problem the Apostle Paul was trying to fix among the first century Christians in Ephesus. The Ephesians were gathering for church, fellowship and Christian service – kind of like our gathering here – and instead of Siri's voice, they heard their own. Their own words and actions were echoed back to them in the letter Paul sent.

Since most people didn't read or write back then, Paul's letter would have been read out loud in church. Can you imagine one of the apostles sending us a letter today that says stop being so angry, get to work, watch what you say, and quit making God sad – “do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God,” as Paul says? Ouch. That makes you wonder how Paul was so effective in planting and nurturing churches, being so negative like that in his criticism of the Ephesians.

And yet, it is just this type of direct and honest communication in the Spirit of Christian love that helps people to be nicer, to do their part, to bless the lives of others, and to have God smile down upon them.

We are blessed as a church to love each other so much that anger really isn't an issue here, as it obviously was in Ephesus. And as far as helping out – having “something to share,” as Paul puts it – everyone here does what they can for the most part. We all try to be a blessing to others. And we know God smiles down upon our church, our congregation.

Church can be that way – a place of love and forgiveness, helpfulness and blessing.

It's not always easy and we're not perfect at it, but we try to do our best. And we trust that most everyone else is trying to do their best, too, sharing in Christian life together, as best we can. That's church; that's what we strive for. But the world outside these walls isn't like church. And yet, that's where we live our lives – outside these walls.

So taking a page from Paul's letter to the Ephesians and applying it to life outside these walls..., well, that might really make a difference in this world, make a difference in our lives, in your life. "Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors...", says Paul. "Be angry, but ... do not let the sun go down on your anger, ... do not make room for the devil." Here, Paul is talking about holding a grudge. Do you have anyone you're angry with right now, anyone you can't forgive? That's a terrible feeling, isn't it? It just eats away at us. And yet, Paul says it's OK to be angry. Anger is only natural and we can't avoid it. "Be angry," says Paul, "but do not sin," do not hold onto to your anger. Instead, forgive. Anger is only natural, but forgiveness is a gift from God.

So, the next time you're angry with someone – instead letting it fester and grow – turn it into a gift, the gift of forgiveness in your heart, a gift that will bless the life of the other person, and bless your life, as well.

The next topic Paul raises with the Ephesians is work. "Labor and work honestly...", says Paul, "so as to have something to share with the needy." Here's another example of turning a negative into a positive. Just like we can turn anger into forgiveness, we can turn work into joy, even when we feel overworked.

How many people here have felt overworked this past week, this past month? Quite a few; not surprising. Most people feel overworked these days, particularly those in retirement; am I right? There's always something you have to do, isn't there, whether you're in the workforce, retired, or in school.

In order to feel good about your packed schedule, think about why you do what you do. I bet you do it for the benefit of others, and not yourself. We go to school so we can become productive members of society. We go to work to put a roof over head and food on the table. We volunteer out of a desire – and calling – to give of ourselves for the sake of others. We all have something to share, something to give amid a world of need.

Take for instance, the elderly couple who walked into a restaurant and ordered a hamburger and a soft drink. The waiter watched as they cut the hamburger in half in order to split it between the two of them. Figuring they couldn't afford much to eat, the waiter offered to bring another burger to the table. "No, no," said the husband. "We share." Later, the waiter passed by and noticed the wife was not eating, obviously waiting to be sure her husband got his fill first. Again, the waiter offered to bring another hamburger, no charge. "No, it's all right. We share." After passing by a third time with the wife still just sitting there, the waiter couldn't help himself. "Why isn't your wife eating?" he asked. "Oh," said the husband, "she's just waiting for the teeth."

We all have something to share, something to give amid a world of need. And that's a blessing. As it says elsewhere in the Bible, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." If we keep that in mind – no matter how hard life gets, no matter how much is on your schedule, no matter how little or how much you have – if we remember the gift of giving, we – and those around us – will be truly blessed, as we are.

We are blessed to have a role in building up the Kingdom of God, by showing love and kindness to others. Next, Paul says "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up...." Here, Paul is talking about those thoughtless things we say in frustration and resentment, things that just come out of the mouth and then you feel terrible.

In order to guard against saying things in anger or frustration or resentment – things that you regret the moment they come out of your mouth – we have to turn our hearts from being negative to being more positive.

For some people, that comes easy. They always have a kind word to say. For others, it can be much harder. Some people have a tendency to speak before they think, and that's when our words get away from us. The trick here is to cultivate a heart of kindness rather than resentment. "Be kind to one another," says Paul, "tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

The point of all this is, life is too short to go through this world in anger, resentment and bitterness. And thankfully, we don't have to. Thankfully, we have been given a Spirit of love and forgiveness, service and blessing.

As Paul says, we are to "... be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." We, too, can live our lives as an offering to God, lives that are pleasing to God, by recognizing that our grudges and hurt feelings are really opportunities for forgiveness, that our busy schedules are really a chance to bless the lives of others, and that our negative thought and feeling are a signal to us, to stop and think before we speak and act. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, weave praise into the fabric of our days so our lives become a blessing to others. Weave peace into our words and deeds so hatred and anger are disarmed.

Weave love into our work so accomplishments are infused with humility. Weave kindness into our actions so the world becomes a joyous place to live.

Weave hope into every encounter so we may testify to God's continuing resurrection power. Weave songs into our worship so our morning might echo in praise to God.

We praise and thank you, God, for all the blessings of our lives, even as we pray for those whose lives need an extra measure of your comfort, care and protection.

We pray all this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, raising our eyes to heaven and our voices in song, praying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.