

“How Do We Break Bread?”

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Ephesians 4.25-5.2

John 6.35, 41-51

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Throughout southern Indiana and parts of Louisville I often saw some signs that said “Just Be Kind.” Perhaps you’ve seen them here, too. These began to pop up around my former neighborhood around the time that the community became concerned about a lack of mental health care providers. I was part of the team that was attempting to address this and we thought that a campaign of kindness would be a helpful beginning – trying to bring some positivity to a community struggling with mental health. Kindness can guide our interactions. If we meet someone who is unkind to us we might wonder if they’re having a bad day, but if it continues, sometimes we decide not to put the energy into that relationship. How we interact with one another is important.

I have also come to realize over time that kindness isn’t everything in our interactions. Kindness is empty if love is not behind it. Without love kindness is just the southern “Bless her heart” addendum at the end, or the “no disrespect” my New Yorker friends add. I’m sure there’s a Midwest equivalent, too. Kindness is also meaningless without justice. When people are kind to one’s face but create unjust laws the actions rule the words.

Our passage from Ephesians today talks about ethics and behaviors in the world. They might seem obvious but perhaps not. We live our lives based on spoken and unspoken rules – laws, expectations, morals, and faith based beliefs. For example, it is a written law that you are to stop at a red light – and everyone who drives knows this expectation. Yet right now we are living into new, unwritten expectations. Since COVID-19 we have been writing the new rules as we go. Do we shake hands? Do we hug? Do we elbow bump? We are reshaping our unwritten social skills as we go.

Here in the Ephesians passage we see the social and ethical and moral laid out in words. Much of it is taken from already known Jewish ethics of the time.¹ Typically these sorts of epistles were written because they needed to be – there was a reason – a person who was doing something they shouldn’t have been doing. It meant someone wasn’t following the unspoken rules, and therefore they needed to be spoken and written and transmitted in a way people could return to review at their leisure. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all unspoken rules were somehow communicated so that we didn’t make social faux pas?

In today’s passage we read about “putting on” certain qualities, and “taking off” those qualities that are not helpful to individuals and society.² This was a clothing metaphor used throughout Ephesians. Much like we change our clothes every day, we should be aware of our actions and interactions every day. This is a daily reminder of how we are to treat one another. When we put on a sweater we can remind ourselves of how we are called to be in fellowship in the world.

What I love about this is that we don’t just have a list of “do not do this,” but also a positive and direct list. I’ve learned that if I want kids to walk in the hallway, I don’t say, “Don’t run!” because that just tells them what not to do – there will always be that child who skips or cartwheels down the hallway instead. So, instead, I

¹ Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: B* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1993), 372.

² J. D. G. Dunn, “Ephesians” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, eds. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1175.

have to be direct and say, “Please walk.” I don’t think this is just with children – I think we all respond better with positive direct instructions.

The first instructions tell us to speak truth, with the byline instruction of not telling lies. This is part of what made me think of kindness as I read through this scripture passage. Sometimes speaking truth to power looks unkind, even though the true kindness is in revealing the truth. This past week I saw a video of Vice President Kamala Harris from a few years ago. She was giving speaking advice to someone in an elevator. She said whatever someone is saying, they shouldn’t worry about what others say about their appearance or sound, but to deliver the information that is important – to speak truth. She said, “You just remember when you’re speaking it’s not about you...it’s not about how you sound. It’s that you have something other people need to know.” She gave the example that if you’re on the Titanic and you’re the only one who knows that the ship is sinking, you don’t worry about how you come across – you just want to get that information out to care for people. I often think of this in speaking about caring for God’s people and conveying words of truth and justice. It is about ourselves getting out of the way and just speaking truth.

The next affirmation is to be angry, but don’t sin. I think it is so important to recognize that anger is a common emotion that should not be hidden or ignored. Often anger means something is wrong and it is our body’s response. The emotion is good, how we express that emotion can be good or not so good. There are healthy ways to express our anger, which is what the passage is telling us. God created us to feel love, grief, joy, pain, happiness, and anger – and to find ways to express all these emotions in productive ways.

Next we are told to do work that is productive and contributes to society. We are encouraged to follow God and imitate God. All of these together are about bringing our focus to God as our center. Of course we will forget how our actions affect others – of course we will let the anger get the best of us – we are human, and God knows that because God created us to be human. The reason we put these on every day is because we will make mistakes, and we have to find ways to re-center ourselves.

It seems in these times it is becoming more and more difficult to speak truth with love and to use our anger in ways to burn for justice rather than burn the world to the ground. Over time it seems our world has become more and more divisive. Before I arrived here I had read a bit about the contentious issue of re-zoning one of the buildings owned by the Masonic Home to house children. I decided to go to the meeting on Wednesday to listen and learn. I learned something I already knew – that this was a microcosm of what is happening in our country – that was happening where I left in small town Indiana – and is happening in the West and the South and East coast. That we are forgetting how to talk to one another, how to have those difficult conversations about difficult topics. When we cannot effectively communicate with one another, we cannot do the good work God has called us to do.

I love what Rev. Elizabeth Hagan wrote in her book *Brave Church*. She talks about how churches need to be having hard conversations around topics like mental illness, domestic violence, racism, and sexuality. She suggests that we move from “safe spaces” to “brave spaces.” When people have conversations in safe spaces they usually “agree to disagree” and leave a tension in the gap. Brave spaces mean setting intentional time and space to have difficult conversations, and it means being vulnerable and risking change.³ Jesus was taking risks all the time – he was challenging authorities and flipping tables on moneychangers and questioning those who were oppressing people. Jesus was the bravest of them all and literally risked his life. We are not called to risk our lives, but following Christ means that we will have uncomfortable conversations and continue learning our entire lives.

In the Gospel reading Jesus is continuing the conversation with the disciples that we read last week. We might remember that Jesus fed the five thousand in the first phase of this section, and then went away for rest.

³ Elizabeth Hagan, *Brave Church*. (Tennessee: Upper Room Books, 2021), 24.

Last week the people sought him out and Jesus clarified that there was bread that fed the stomach, and bread that fed the spiritual aspect of one's life. The disciples had heard of Moses and the manna but they were having a hard time understanding the idea of bread as life giving, as the Word of God. Jesus, the patient soul he is, continues to explain that to them over and over again. He continues to feed their stomachs and to feed their souls.

Food is so central to what Jesus does because he brings people around the table to talk, to eat, to have fellowship. Thinking again to how broken our world is, I know too many people from so many different places who have not been able to sit down to a meal with family because of different opinions on vaccinations and masks and politics and so much more. The simple act of eating a meal with people has become incredibly difficult. If we cannot eat bread together, then we have a problem. Again, breaking bread is essential to the work we are called to do in the world.

Jesus teaches us how to have these brave conversations, to dare to sit with one another and learn from each other and have vulnerable conversations. How do we break bread together? Perhaps this is another part we are relearning after a difficult year – learning how to be in community with one another and to trust that God is at work even in the difficult conversations. To trust that God is reshaping us and transforming us for something amazing. Thanks be to God. Amen.