

Chicken and Egg

August 15, 2021

What comes first?

There's a comedian my husband listens to sometimes who jokes about the wisdom of Solomon, which the passage Cheryl read for us today alludes to. Do you know the story of Solomon and the baby?

The story goes that two women and a baby are brought before this wise king, this king who asked God for the ability to discern between good and evil. Both women claim that the baby is theirs, and ask Solomon to resolve their dispute.

Solomon's response? He orders that the baby be cut in two, and each woman be given half. When one of the women protests, he declares that she must be the mother, because she doesn't want the child cut in half.

In the comic bit that my husband listens to, the comedian is incredulous, "THAT is how you know someone is a mother? Because they don't want to cut a baby in half?"

For much of my adult life, I've believed that we, as a civilization, have grown beyond needing such tricks as to discern people's true motivations and depth of character, but in the last few years, I'm not so sure...

Our New Testament reading today comes from the Letter to the Ephesians. At first glance, it sounds like a list of negative and positive behavioral instructions:

- Don't steal; rather, work honestly both for what you need and also so that you have something to be able to take care of the poor in our midst.
- Don't let evil words come out of your mouth; rather, make sure that what you say builds people up and gives grace to those who hear you.

And, if all we do is take that list of do's and don'ts at face value, this passage can be a worthwhile tool. Put away falsehood; rather, speak the truth because we are all members of one another. Oh, how much better our world would be if more of us abided by that ethic!

But there's even more going on here. Richard Carlson who teaches New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Gettysburg explains that the overall arc of this letter is that our reality shapes our conduct. That's a little heady, so let me say it again: our reality shapes our conduct.

Ephesians starts out telling us that we are God's beloved, that we are members of the Body of Christ, and now this passage teases out what that means. As members of the Body of Christ, our behaviors ought to reflect that reality. Stealing and lying and holding grudges don't model a Christian life. Rather than engaging in "bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, and malice," a life rooted in Christ's ways will manifest kindness, tenderness, and forgiveness. (Not a bad text to have as instruction on a Sunday

that we're celebrating a baptism, is it? This is what we're praying will integrate itself into Mariposa's life, and indeed into the lives of all of the faithful.)

This idea that our understanding of who we are then shaping our conduct is actually part of how I prepare families for baptism. You see, in some religious traditions, the teaching is that we baptize because we are sinful. But friends, even as the mother of a toddler who is in the food-flinging stage, I just can't wrap my mind around the idea that my daughter or Mariposa is sinful. The math just doesn't bear itself out.

But this idea that is put forth in Ephesians that our reality shapes our conduct gives us a whole different angle on baptism. If our reality shapes our conduct, then, instead of Baptism cleansing us from evil, Baptism immerses us in who we are: beloved and full of grace. With this lens, baptism tells us who we are and gives us the basis for living as the Beloved Community. Not only is this scriptural, it's good psychology.

The brilliant 20th century Swiss psychologist Carl Jung expressed it this way:

*If our religion is based on salvation, our chief emotions will be fear and trembling.
If our religion is based on wonder, our chief emotion will be gratitude.*

When we start from a place of wonder, of belonging and belovedness, gratitude and grace, rather than fear and trembling, are the fruits that we bear.

Egg and Chicken

Now, while our passage from 1 Kings tells us that it was because Solomon asked for wisdom that he was blessed, and the overarching arc of the Letter to the Ephesians tells us that our behaviors stem from who it is we understand ourselves to be, and one of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century backs up those notions, Fr. Richard Rohr, the wise Franciscan monk who founded the Center for Action and Contemplation, says, "we cannot think ourselves into a new way of living; rather, we must live ourselves into a new way of thinking."

So which one is it? Does our thinking dictate our living or does our living create our thinking? Yes. This really is a chicken and egg dilemma: as people who need to be renewed, need to be transformed by the grace of God, Richard Rohr is right, we need to live this new way. But if we're stuck in negativity and shame and fear, if at the center of our faith is the idea that we are unworthy, that transformation is always going to be only skin deep.

In this, Martin Luther has some particularly helpful thoughts. He writes:

This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.

Conclusion

Friends, so much in our individual lives and in our world today, from voter suppression to lies about the vaccine, from racism to homelessness, could use a healthy dose of more people living this passage from Ephesians. Do you notice that the passage doesn't say, "Don't be angry"? It says, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." All too often, this verse is used to tell people to stuff their anger, to deny it. But we know what happens when anger is denied – it comes out in other, often even more damaging ways.

That's why the passage doesn't actually say, "Don't be angry." Anger is a healthy, important emotion. There are things in this world that SHOULD anger us. What the verse says is, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." Don't let it consume you. Don't hold on to it and become best friends with it. Don't allow your anger to contort who you are. Don't allow your anger and fear to tempt you into bitterness and wrangling and malice and slander and uttering falsehood.

No, anger can be healthy, but for it to be such it needs to be buttressed by all of the rest of the behaviors this passage extolls:

- honest speech,
- honest work,
- forgiveness,
- and kindness.

Friends, from time to time we lift up a scripture passage that is so helpful in the living of a Christlike life that it needs to be seared into our very beings. Today, I'd like to suggest that this is one of those. Now, we've got a handy opportunity right now, since we're printing the scriptures in your bulletins. I encourage you to take your bulletin with you today, cut out the passage from Ephesians, and put it somewhere that you'll see it regularly. (Or, if you're reading the print version of this, we'll print the text at the end of this.) Clip it to the visor in your car. Tape it to the wall behind your computer monitor. Place it somewhere that you'll see it, and then commit yourself to reading it, praying it, living it. Over and over and over again.

My prayer this week is, that the more of us who live from our reality, the more of us who behave based on the foundational principle that we are wholly beloved by God and are all members of one body in Christ, the more graced all existence will be. May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen.

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1 Kings 3:5-14; Ephesians 4:25-5:2
August 15, 2021

The text from Ephesians 4:25-5:2 follows on the next page.

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil that kind of room in your life.

Thieves, give up stealing; rather, labor and work honestly with your own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

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.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Therefore 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.