

A FRAGRANT OFFERING

A Sermon On Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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*"Therefore be imitators of Christ, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." **Ephesians 5:2***

I was not with you last Sunday. I am deeply appreciative to Nancy Osborn for delivering the worship message last week. It is truly a blessing to serve with such a devoted and skilled staff. Last Sunday I was leading worship at the Lake Louise summer chapel service. I tell you about it because the speaker was Rev. Bill Ritter and he made a point in the sermon that I want to share with you today. Bill's text for the day was the parable of the Good Samaritan. He reflected on what it means to live in Godly relationship with one another. Bill turns 69 years old this summer. He served churches in the Detroit Annual Conference for forty years at the time of his retirement in 2005. He currently is the Executive Director of the United Methodist Union of Greater Detroit. Bill confessed that after all of that time in active and successful ministry he still has a passion for the calling and a strong desire to serve. "I never tired of the ministry, and it still excites me." Said Bill. "What I am weary of after all these years is the constant arguing and bickering between those of differing theological view points. Can we who believe that compassionate service is central to our discipleship not acknowledge that we also need the contributions of those brothers and sisters who believe that evangelical passion is the core of the Christian faith? Can our evangelical brothers and sisters not understand that those for whom compassionate service is central are also living out their Christianity with integrity? Loving service and evangelical passion are both needed within the household of faith."

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I know of few passages of scripture as radical and as potentially transforming as this admonition found in Ephesians. Now before you leap to your feet to disagree with me and before you begin to offer other citations that have power to change our lives, consider this. How might the world be different if we all lived our lives as though the very living of life – day in and day out – were in fact our most important offering to God? To be imitators of God, to live and love as Christ loved us, to give of ourselves in something like the way Christ gave himself for us, this is a fragrant offering to God.

Recently we have seen a rise in the public display of anger. Television is filled with reports of public meetings disrupted by angry shouting and rants. It makes me wonder if we have completely lost our capacity for reasoned, thoughtful and civil conversation as we address import issues. Why is it that we regard anger as an excuse for sinful behavior? How many times has someone beat their spouse and then declared, "I'm not responsible. She made me crazy. I'm sorry I punched her out, but I was out of control." Why is it that you and I have learned to drive with our doors locked and without ever making eye contact with people in other cars? How many times have you witnessed someone getting angry while driving, regarding that anger as an excuse to fly into a rage? How often have we nurtured our anger and refused to resolve our dispute with another because anger feels so powerful and requires so little of us? Don't let the sun go down on your anger? There was a time in my life when I told the story of my anger to anyone who would listen. For months I told the story because I thought I was getting it out of my system. Then I started to wonder why God was not working to heal my wounded heart. How could there be healing when I spent so much time rehearsing my anger? How many frustrated parents have stood with their child

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beside them while they said to the teacher, "I hope you can do something with him. He's nothing like his sister. She was really smart, but he is really stupid..."? Every thoughtless word carves away at that child's heart and tears him down. Where is the grace? Where is the forgiveness? How can we do these things to one another if we really believe that we are one in the body of Christ, that we are members of one another? These are the offerings we frequently place before God. It would be bad enough if we didn't know any better, but we are the ones who have declared ourselves to be the followers of Jesus the Christ, imitators of Christ, and still we offer malice and bitterness, anger and wrangling. Can't you imagine God holding God's divine nose?

Why do we act like this? Do we lack moral fiber? Have we become completely inept in the practice of civility? Have we taken self expression to such an extreme that we have no power to control ourselves? I am convinced that we are not witnessing a failure of morals or a failure of civility or a failure of self control. Instead we are witnessing a failure of hope. We feel alone; cut off from one another and completely dependant upon ourselves. Look out for number one. God helps those who help themselves, etc., etc. We have forgotten that we belong to God, that we are together in God's abundant love, and that God is greater than any problem we might ever face. There is no hope to be found in trying to figure out who is right and who is wrong. There is no salvation in our trying to blame others for the things that disappoint or disturb us. Jesus never promised that if we follow him we will know for certain who is good and who is bad. Jesus never said, "Come unto me and we will shut out the rest of the world." Authentic hope comes when we acknowledge a sovereign God bigger than any box we try to create. Authentic hope comes when

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we acknowledge that through Christ we are members of the same body standing before the same God.

How we speak reveals where we have placed our hope. Yes I may feel angry even with others I love very much, but anger is no foundation for the Christian life. Anger is to be resolved in order that love might proceed. You may be surprised how destructive your words may be. Be careful what you say, for bitterness and malice grieve the Holy Spirit. God is greater than any problem we can face. If God can forgive the crucifixion of a son how can we not forgive the minor offenses that come our way? 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.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

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Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2 (NRSV)

²⁵So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹Let 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. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. [£]
^{5:1}Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ^{5:2}and live in love, as Christ loved us [£] and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.