

## A New Paradigm of Faith

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American novelist and environmental advocate, Wendell Berry, once wrote, "I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love."

Richard Carlson, another American author, said, "Choose being kind over being right and you'll be right every time."

There's a meme making its way around Facebook: "Be selective with your battles. Sometimes peace is better than being right."

These simple statements provide a doorway into our Scripture for today:

EPHESIANS 4:29-32 (NRSV) *Let no evil (idle) 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.* <sup>30</sup>*And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day* *of redemption.* <sup>31</sup>*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,* <sup>32</sup>*and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

As high school students, many of us memorized Robert Burns' poem:

Many and sharp the num'rous ills  
Inwoven with our frame!  
More pointed still we make ourselves  
Regret, remorse, and shame!  
And man, whose heav'n-erected face  
The smiles of love adorn, –  
Man's inhumanity to man  
Makes countless thousands mourn!

Jesus ate with sinners of every variety, touched the untouchables, healed the unclean and even reminded those in Nazareth that when there was famine in *Israel*, God sent Elijah to feed a woman from *Sidon*; when there were many lepers in *Israel*, God had sent Elisha to heal a *Syrian* named Naaman—both of whom were heathen aliens!

Jesus refused to condemn a woman caught in the act of committing adultery (a capital offense in that culture), he visited in the home of Zacchaeus, a treasonous, embezzling Publican, and he advised carrying a Roman soldier's pack not just one mile, as the law allowed, but two miles.

Jesus called upon his followers to forgive others 70 X 7 times (literally 490 times, which is more than any of us would even attempt; but in the numerology of that day was probably intended as an *infinite* number of times) and never, ever to retaliate or seek vengeance. He even forgave the ones who nailed him to the cross.

The Pharisees boasted of their righteousness. Perhaps they even kept

checklists of the laws they obeyed. They dotted every "i" and crossed every "t"; but Jesus said, "...unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20 NRSV).

The Pharisees thought they were honoring God—sincerely trying to earn and deserve God's approval with their legalistic and unquestioning obedience to a set of laws; but they missed the whole point of law, which was to describe our relationship with God by looking at our relationship with people.

Jesus reserved his strongest rebuke for those who openly boasted of their piety and their moral superiority and then used their *religious* authority to dominate all who dared to deviate from their dogmatic pronouncements.

Some Christians, all the time; and all Christians, some of the time, tend to be a bit like Pharisees. We tend to read Scripture selectively. That's not necessarily bad Jesus read Scripture selectively, too; and so did Paul. The issue is not *whether* we read the Bible selectively, but rather, *which texts we select*.

I grew up in a tradition that saw the primary purpose of the Bible as showing us how to get into heaven. And we picked out the verses—and memorized them—that we could use to prove we were going to heaven. And sometimes that meant picking out verses that proved why other people *weren't* going to heaven. James Glass called that "White Anglo-Saxon Negative Self-Identity:" we're not like them.

In contrast, Jesus selected Scriptures that lead to human relationships of compassion, healing, restoration, reconciliation and love. He rejected Scripture passages that lead to vengeance, retaliation and violence or domination of any kind.

Theologian, Walter Wink, begins the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of his book, *The Powers that Be*, with these words:

"American culture is presently in the first stages of a spiritual renaissance. To the degree that this renaissance is Christian at all, it will be the human figure of Jesus that galvanizes hearts to belief and action, and not the Christ of the creeds or the Pauline doctrine of justification by grace through faith. And in the teachings of Jesus, the sayings on nonviolence and love of enemies will hold a central place. Not because they are more true than any others, but because they are crucial in the struggle to overcome domination without creating new forms of domination."

I keep thinking of Robert Fulghum's book, *All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten*. On a website dedicated to the book, he summarized:

"These are the things I learned:

- Share everything.
- Play fair.

- Don't hit people.
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Don't take things that aren't yours.
- Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
- Wash your hands before you eat.
- Flush.
- Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
- Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
- Take a nap every afternoon.
- When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together.
- Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: the roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.
- Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.
- And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.

"Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

"Take any one of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to your family life or your work or government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm. Think what a better world it would be if we all—the whole world—had cookies and milk at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess.

"And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out in the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together."

Or, in the words of our text this morning, "Be kind to one another." Or, from another perspective, The first Epistle of John closes this way: "*Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.*" (I JOHN 4:20 NRSV) Why do we tend to make it so complicated?

Well, having arrived so late in life at this new paradigm of faith, I finally have surrendered all anxiety about my eternal destiny to the one who said, "My grace is sufficient." Now, it is my intention, and my prayer, that my reading of Scripture will keep me on the path: following Jesus, even in—especially in—my

relationship with other humans.

I have a deeper sense of freedom and joy in Christ, and I have a smidgen of resentment for all those years wasted in that old pattern of reading the Bible to prove I'm right—to reassure myself that I'm on the right path to heaven.

I've come to the conclusion that I'll never be totally right, except in the act of entrusting my eternal destiny to Christ and moving on to serve him.