

**Shedding False Identity**  
**Ephesians 4:25-5:2**  
**Jennie Clark**

Last week listening to the radio in the car, I heard a story of how a popular podcast host asked her Twitter followers to share a picture that they had uploaded to social media- a picture in which they looked great, but were actually going through a difficult time. The tweet went viral. And there was an outpouring of cheerful snapshots, accompanied with heart-wrenching, behind-the-scenes stories.

One young woman who responded shared a stunning photo of herself that was taken in the Caribbean. She holds her hair in her hands while standing in shallow water smiling. From this gorgeous image you would never know that this was one of the worst moments in her life. At the time when the photo was snapped she was diagnosed with depression and was later diagnosed with bipolar 2. She shared that she was at a place in her life where she dreaded waking up each morning.

Heartsick about her daughter, her mother had taken her on a vacation trying to chase away her depression. Things didn't happen as her mother had hoped. Her mother felt powerless and broke down in tears a lot during their get away. But, there were a few fleeting moments when the gloom briefly lifted. Her mother captured one of those rare instances in this photo of her daughter smiling on the beach.<sup>1</sup>

We all to some degree carefully craft and hone our identity. We work hard to present a favorable image of ourselves to the world. What we show may be true, but it is not the *full* truth.

Facebook or social media are the perfect platforms for this kind of creating and maintaining the image that we want the world to see. It allows us to selectively choose to share the favorable bits of ourselves in happy moments, while excluding the realities about us that we would just die if anyone knew. That is why we rarely see people post updates saying things like: *"I spent the weekend alone again or I just manipulated my spouse to get my own way,"<sup>2</sup> or I embarrassed myself when I lost my temper."*

Today's text from Ephesians is speaking to the Christian community about living from our true identity in Christ, encouraging us to put away falsehoods and to be imitators of God. The first three chapters of Ephesians have a theological emphasis- Christ in the Church. Now in these final three chapters 4-6, Paul pivots to an ethical emphasis- how the Church is to live in Christ.

Today's text connects with last week's text, Ephesians 4:1-16, where baptism was lifted up as the unifying source for our lives as Christians. Our one baptism unites us with Christ and with one another. Through the waters of baptism we are swept into the river of God's life and love flowing into the world and the universe through Jesus Christ.

The river, into which we are baptized, is the very being of Christ: his person, his body and his sphere of influence. As members of Christ's body through our baptism, we are caught up in the reconciling work that God is doing in and through us to bring life and renewal to a broken and hurting world. Today's passage links the ethics of our life in Christ with our baptism.

Last January my husband and I accompanied our daughter, Ashley, and our infant grandson, Byler, from Philadelphia back to their home in Maui. We broke up the long trip spending a night in San Diego before making the last leg of our flight to Maui.

Traveling with an infant is challenging. First there's all the baby paraphernalia you have to haul along with your own stuff. Then there's the challenge of trying to get to and through the airport lugging all this behind you and onto the plane while balancing the needs of the infant: sleeping, crying, feedings and diaper changes.

Wouldn't you know it right before we are to board the plane Byler has a diaper blow out. It was epic! My daughter and I leapt into action running to the bathroom with the odorous baby, wishing we had HAZMAT suits.

The mess went up his back and all over the adorable outfit he was sporting. We worked as a team, delicately maneuvering the fouled garment over his head without letting it touch his face. While Ashley cleaned him and put him in a new outfit I asked what she wanted me to do with the soiled one we stripped off. She said: *"Put it in the trash. There's no way we're bringing that onto the plane!"*

Today's passage opens in v. 25 with talk of *"putting away"*, which can be a reference to baptism. *"Strip off and throw away"* would be more to the point. At baptism in the early church the old clothing was stripped off. And the baptized person put on a new white robe, symbolizing a new identity through baptism. (William H. Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Year B, Vol. 43, Aug. 9, 2015, Meditation on the Text) Later in v. 30 there's another reference to our baptism when it says: *"Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption."*

As people who are baptized, we are to shed our former identity and put on a new identity in Christ. We are joined to a new community and a new culture with new ethics for how we're to live with one another.

The lectionary reading doesn't include the passages that precede today's reading, but in Ephesians 4:22-24 believers are told to: *"put away your former way of life, your old self . . . be renewed . . . clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."*

This new life means first of all (v. 25) stripping away what is false and taking up the practice of: *"speaking the truth to one another"*. The church is meant to be a community where truth can be spoken: the difficult truths about the world and about ourselves, and the gracious truth about the God, who has redeemed us.<sup>3</sup>

This call to *speaking truth to one another* then leads into another call in v. 26 *anger lead us to sin*. There's a warning here about what anger can do to us.

Many of us, including yours truly, are quite good at distorting the call to “*speaking truth*”, using it as a way to manipulate, retaliate, or tear down others. And when we do this we misuse God’s word to justify our own sinful ways. Such devious behavior comes from our false self. It is not of Christ and it tarnishes our witness to him. It’s precisely that kind of thing that alienates people from the Christian community who say they are spiritual but not religious. They admire and respect Jesus Christ, but don’t want to have anything to do with his Church.

Paul goes on to lay out the ethics for living our life in Christ in verses 26-32:

- *Do honest labor so you can contribute to helping the poor.*
- *Watch that nothing evil comes out of your mouth. Speak only to build up as there is need.*
- *Put away all bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander and malice.*
- *Put on being kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

Paul doesn’t tell the Ephesians or us to do all these things in order to **become** a Christian. Rather he tells us to live by these ethics because we **are** Christians. There’s a difference!<sup>4</sup>

Ephesians begins (1:4-5) by describing what God has already done for us before we did anything to be worthy of God: “*God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.*”

Because we are God’s children, we are royalty. In today’s text Paul reminds us that we are who we are, because God has loved and forgiven us in Jesus Christ. He tells us: “You are somebody, so act like it!”<sup>5</sup>

Though we post pictures that portray ourselves in the best light, God knows the back-stories behind those images. God knows the things we are hiding: our shame, our secrets, our wounds, our addictions . . . our brokenness. God knows all the things about us that we don’t post on social media and yet still loves us with an unfathomable, immeasurable love, given freely without condition to people like us through Jesus Christ.

It is precisely because God loves us that we become loveable, worthy of love. God’s love claims us as the beloved sons and daughters of God. It frees us from having to live in a superficial false identity that is exhausting to maintain as we work hard to look like we’re doing better than we really are.

The truth is that we all come to this life in Christ with our rough edges. God gives us to one another to help each other smooth out those edges as we live from our center in Christ’s love. Our text concludes by calling us to “*Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and to live in love, as Christ loved and gave himself up for us.*” Our individual lives and our life in community are meant to reflect God’s image, God’s grace towards one another and towards the world.

Father Richard Rohr writes: *We are created in the image and likeness of God from the moment of our conception. The Creator gives us our core identity as sons and daughters of God, “from the beginning” (Ephesians 1:4-5). Throughout our lives we co-create our unique likeness as we grow and mature. We have a say in the process! God creates things with the freedom and permission to continue the act of creation*

*Life gives us opportunities to discover our image and develop our likeness, often in the form of necessary stumbling and falling. Throughout it all we are always held inside of Love . . . With the guidance of the Spirit and the help of wise mentors and elders, all of life including our “false” or small and separate self, can lead us to our True Self, ‘who we are in Christ.’*

Whenever my children left the house when they were growing up, I would send them off with these words: *I love you. God be with you. And remember who you are.*

I want us to leave today hearing similar words to assure us of the message to us in Ephesians . . . *We are loved. God is with us. Let us speak truth to one another, helping one another to shed false identity, so we remember who we are in Christ.*

So I invite you do just that by to saying these words to one another as I instruct you. Looking across the sanctuary at your brothers and sisters in Christ, say aloud to them:

***You are loved! God is with you! Remember who you are!***

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

#### Resources

1 (Jasmin Garsd, NPR- All Things Considered, #Blessed: Is Everyone Happier Than You on Social Media?, Aug. 6, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/06/636016812/-blessed-is-everyone-happier-than-you-on-social-media> )

2 (Nadia Bolz-Weber, Makers.com, Separating Self From Selfie/ Have a Little Faith, <https://www.makers.com/videos/5b0dd9e7c269d638f7a77c54>

3 Brian Peterson, WorkingPreacher.org, commentary on text, Aug. 9, 2015

4 William H. Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Year B, Vol. 43, Aug. 9, 2015, meditation on text

5 ibid.

6 (Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, “Growing in Love’s Likeness”, March 25, 2018, Center for Action and Contemplation Daily Meditations, adapted from *Falling Upward: Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (Jossey-Bass): 2011, p. 153-154, <https://cac.org/two-halves-of-life-2018-03-25/>