

**Who Ya Gonna Be?  
Ephesians 4:25-5:2  
Don Lincoln**

First week of August 2000 – twenty-one years ago, on my first day of work at Westminster, I received greetings from several “friends”. In my mailbox was a card from my wife, Linda.....with thoughts and prayers for that first day of work here. Shortly thereafter, one of the staff members walked in with a bouquet of flowers and a note from my parents – who for the previous six months had been praying daily for me and for this congregation. Late that afternoon I got a call from my kids, who were on a trip in Florida, asking me if I had “John Calvin in a can.” Only Presbyterian preacher’s kids would think that funny!

As the first day unfolded, my new “friends” – the staff – greeted me warmly – in the hallway, stopped in my office, found me in the copy room by the mailboxes and welcomed me warmly. Jim Ash, chairperson of the Pastor Nominating Committee that brought me here to Westminster called from vacation in the mountains to extend a welcome on day one, to thank me for accepting the call. It was a great day.

But just a few days later, standing at the door at the back of the sanctuary after my first sermon as the new pastor here, someone came out, shook my hand and said, “Well – you’re certainly not Dr. Young.”

For those of you who don’t know him, Dr. Robert Young was the pastor of Westminster prior to me. Bob – our Pastor Emeritus – blessed this congregation with superb preaching, crafty wit, pastoral warmth, and wise leadership for 32 years. He still worships with us weekly, and hosts a viewing of Westminster’s recorded service at the Wellington Retirement Community on Sunday afternoons.

I was well aware of the fact 21 years ago that I wasn’t Bob Young. For starters, I’m the same age as Bob’s kids. A completely different generation. Fortunately for me, Bob became a friend and a mentor and I cherish all the things I have learned from him. Thanks Bob!

I’m not sure exactly what the member meant when they said I was no Dr. Young, but it had the ring of disappointment rather than a tone of celebration. It was a little unsettling to hear. But I had already been in ministry 20 years. I learned very early on in pastoral ministry you will hear many things – some of them very encouraging; some of them challenging; some of them absolutely deflating.

Most of us know that **nothing** has the capacity to either **build up** or **destroy life** like the human tongue. Every time you and I speak we have the potential of either building or destroying.<sup>1</sup>

Which is why I love today's lectionary text from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It is such a rich expression and commendation of how you and I should be with one another. Listen to **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 make room for the devil.

Thieves 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.

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." This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

How much better might the state of our national discourse be if every morning pundits and politicians alike read this passage from Ephesians before they opened their mouth? Perhaps we would hear less predictable, slanderous rhetoric and actually more loving truth-telling. Of course, I shouldn't just talk about them.

How much better might **our personal discourse** be – with spouses, children, parents, relatives, neighbors – if every morning you and I read this Ephesians passage before we opened OUR mouths?!! Instead of those in our lives being the recipients of angry outbursts, might they receive tenderheartedness, forgiveness?

Who among us does not long to live in a society where "bitterness, rage, anger, slander and every form of malice" are the rare exceptions, rather than the rule; where "kindness, compassion, and forgiveness" dominate?

Sure, there are things that anger us. ALL of us. The apostle knows that. Notice Paul doesn't say don't get angry. In fact, he says the exact opposite. BE angry. The imperative form. BE angry! Go ahead – BE ANGRY!

Be angry – but do not sin. Do not be destructive with your anger. Do not say something you will regret or pay for. Do not let it fester inside – don't let the sun go

down on it. Unpack it. But don't let evil talk or slander or meanness or malice be the result of that anger. Especially when you are telling the truth.

"Be kind to one another" writes the Apostle Paul. Scholar NT Wright says of this passage: "Kindness is central to what Christianity is all about. Because it says so in this passage: Kindness is one of the purest forms of the imitation of God.

How would it be if God was the kind of God who was always making snide or bitter remarks at us? What would worship and prayer be like if we thought God had been talking about us behind our backs, putting us down to others? How would you and I feel if we thought we couldn't trust God to tell us the truth; if God was always losing His temper with us?

Well – then how do you think people feel about US if that's what we're like??<sup>2</sup>

At Thursday's Global Leadership Summit, speaker Shola Richards sounded a lot like the Apostle Paul to me in his speech. Shola is the founder and CEO of the **Go Together Movement** – a transformational roadmap of **civility** – mindset, behaviors, and tools to transform workplace culture.

He said, we all know there are two types of people in the world. The ones who make you feel good as soon as they walk into the room. And the ones who make you feel good as soon as they walk out of it.

He quoted author Brennan Manning: "In every encounter, you either give life, or you drain it. There are no neutral exchanges." Listen again: "In every encounter, you either give life, or you drain it."

It's exactly what the Apostle Paul is saying. "Let no evil talk come out of your mouth; only what is for building up!" You and I are defined by how we treat one other – family, friends, colleagues, coworkers, strangers. Our words and our actions affect others. Think about it. In every interaction you are giving life, or draining it.

I'm almost 4 months into physical therapy following shoulder surgery. My primary therapist is a member of this congregation who has her own PT group and they are amazing. And you know what I hear from her as she pushes and stretches my shoulder toward greater range of motion?

"That's excellent. Oh my – how great is that? Look how far you're reaching. That's beautiful! That's so good!" At one point I asked her if I was really doing that well or if she was just blowing smoke at me. She smiled and said, "I think positive encouragement is the best way for me to keep you striving further. I'll be honest with you when I need to be, but I'm not going to beat you up with words. And you ARE doing well." Building up, not destroying. Giving life, not draining it.

Thankfully, unlike that single comment on that first Sunday 21 years ago, the overwhelming majority of feedback we receive as a team here at Westminster is

positive, encouraging, life-giving. Certainly there are offerings of constructive criticism, and even questions about certain directions, leanings, etc. We all know we need to continue to learn and grow; and to hear and speak the truth – but it's OK and fun to do that when it's done in love.

There are expressions of kindness and appreciation to the team weekly. We have a guest book online, and people who watch on line leave commendations about the music, worship or about the message, no matter who is preaching.

But I need to tell you, the first 4 weeks of the pandemic – there was an outpouring from the congregation – a folder full and I've kept them all – literally dozens and dozens of notes and cards.

*March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020 – we are extremely grateful to you for providing a 9:45 am worship service this past Sunday, which we watched on our computer instead of the Maris Grove chapel. Although the sanctuary was empty, we are all united with each other in worship. The message, prayer and music eased the anxiety felt during this troublesome time.*

*March 22<sup>nd</sup> – we want to tell you all how much the service meant to us. Amazing what was put together to keep it all normal. Our family knows you all who are “holding down the fort” need our prayers, so we are sending them.*

*Thanks to everyone who is keeping WPC going – Ann, Don, Jon and Jennie – Bob and Glenn – and those we don't see on streaming but are still keeping the church clean, safe, online, and active. God be with you until we meet again. Stay well.*

I have a whole stack of them.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up.

We continue, in challenging times, as a nation and a world.

May we – as individuals, as family members, as citizens and as followers of Jesus Christ continue to be known for how we are building up one another in love. How in every interaction we are giving life, rather than draining it. The world will be blessed, and so will we.

May it be so. AMEN

1. Craig Barnes, “Will You Build or Destroy?”, sermon at Shadyside Presbyterian Church, January 13, 2008.
2. NT Wright Paul for Everyone, Commentary on Ephesians.