

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
8/9/2009, Pentecost 10B  
Ephesians 4:25-5:2, John 6:35, 41-51  
Gentleness of Speech

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

In Martin Luther's discussion of prayer in *The Large Catechism*, he says that prayer is necessary for the Christian because we live in a world that vexes, tempts, and annoys us, and that we need to be people of prayer so that we will have a chance to continue in faith. A similar thing can be said about the manner of Christian conversation: that we live in a world that vexes, tempts, and annoys us, and therefore we would do well to heed the apostolic exhortations toward gentleness of speech.

So, my text this morning is from our Second Lesson -- the last two verses of Ephesians Chapter Four and the first two verses of Chapter Five. St. Paul is urging a particular form of love. He is speaking of that love that expresses itself in gentleness of speech. The apostle writes this:

<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. <sup>5:1</sup>Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, <sup>2</sup>and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 4:31 - 5:2, NRSV)

A mighty exhortation we have here! "Be ye imitators of God!" If such we are, then our speech shall become more calm and we shall have fewer regrets in life.

But there is a problem for us in this matter of gentleness of speech. In fact, it is with gentleness of speech as with all the virtues, that the right path is somehow a *middle* path: one that does not practice gentleness overmuch, such that it forbids another good thing. I mean "righteous indignation." Gentleness of speech must not become an excuse for fleeing the battlefield.

So, there we have the two parts of my sermon: First, I mean to mention some Biblical cases of righteous indignation, and then I mean to speak of gentleness of speech, trying to leave room for each in the Christian life.

The example of righteous indignation that first came to my mind is the story of the shepherd boy David before the insolent giant Goliath. I love that story and want to hasten to it, but as a matter of discipline, I have searched my memory for stories of righteous indignation in the New Testament too. I do this because I do not want to suggest that wrath and fiery language belong only to the Old Testament.

Actually, I did not have to go far to think of righteous indignation in the New Testament. In fact, I bet your mind quickly goes to the same story my mind does. It is a story concerning Jesus himself. Note that our text lays a firm foundation for gentleness of speech by pointing to the love of Christ:

<sup>2</sup>and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us... (Eph. 5:2, NRSV)

And certainly it is true that Christ is a man of love -- overwhelming love that spares not even his own life for the sake of others.

Yet, this same Jesus could show righteous indignation -- aye, and never once depart from love along the way.

<sup>14</sup>And found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting: <sup>15</sup>And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; <sup>16</sup>And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise. <sup>17</sup>And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up. (John 2:14-17, KJV)

So, in this story Jesus rebukes others. He *rebukes* them, but does not destroy them. He rebukes them, thereby driving them back onto the safe path, lest they fall headlong over a cliff. I mean the story of Jesus and the moneychangers in the Temple:

Let me move on to another story of righteous indignation in the New Testament. This time I am thinking of story from Acts. Think of what befell that half-hearted couple Ananias and Sapphira when they attempted to deceive the apostles about the size of their offering:

<sup>1</sup>But a man named Ananias with his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property, <sup>2</sup>and with his wife's knowledge he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. <sup>3</sup>But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup>While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." <sup>5</sup>When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. (Acts 5:1-5, RSV)

Perhaps an even more interesting example concerns St. Paul himself -- the very one who preaches of gentleness of speech in today's reading. In his First

Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul refers to a notorious case of sexual impropriety tolerated by the Corinthians: a case of fornication between a man and his father's wife. As it turns out, St. Paul does not speak so gently concerning this case:

<sup>3</sup>For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment <sup>4</sup>in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup>you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. (1 Corinthians 5:3-5, KJV)

And the last case I will mention is the one I especially like: young David's defiant words to Goliath, who had mocked the armies of Israel:

<sup>45</sup>Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. <sup>46</sup>This day will the LORD deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee; and I will give the carcasses of the host of the Philistines this day unto the fowls of the air, and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. <sup>47</sup>And all this assembly shall know that the LORD saveth not with sword and spear: for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hands. (1 Sam 17:43-47, KJV)

So, we see that strong words can be found in the Bible as well as gentle words, and the Bible does not frown on these strong words. If we sought a commonality in these cases of righteous indignation -- Jesus driving out the moneychangers, St. Peter rebuking Ananias and Sapphira, St. Paul judging the case of sexual impropriety, and David rebuking Goliath -- I think that the matter at issue is the Second Commandment. In each case, the honor of God is at stake. If Goliath can scorn the armies of the LORD, if the moneychangers can convert the Temple into a place of business, if a Christian Corinthian can act as if the morality of the Church is no different from the morality of the world... if these things are permitted to stand, then all else falls! That is, blasphemy puts faith and hope at risk because it misrepresents our God, and so love compels some kind of protest in order to defend the truth of the Gospel. So, that is a limit on gentleness of speech: Christian speech need not be so gentle that it remains mild before those things that would destroy faith and hope on earth.

So, let's turn to gentleness of speech. Let's turn to the manner of our conversation that lies short of righteous indignation. The general rule for Christian speech is that we are to "speak the truth with love." And so, short of that, short of blasphemy and misrepresentation of God's word, we should strive for peace in our dealings one with another. It is as St. Paul says to the young preacher Titus:

<sup>1</sup>Put them in mind...<sup>2</sup>To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men. (Titus 3:1-2, KJV)

In Chrysostom's homily on our text, he speaks of the holy privileges given to our tongues. Why! With our tongue and our lips we received the Blessed Sacrament and we join the Sanctus with the angels above:

Think what words thy mouth uttered,--of what table these words are worthy. Think what thy mouth touches, what it tastes, of what manner of food it partakes! Dost thou deem thyself to be doing nothing grievous in railing at thy brother?...Think with whom thou standest at the time of the mysteries! With the Cherubim, with the Seraphim! The Seraphim revile not: no, their mouth fulfills this one only duty, to sing the Hymn of praise, to glorify God. And how then shalt thou be able to say with them, "Holy, Holy, Holy," if thou use thy mouth for reviling?

Violence is constructed from many ingredients. The apostle would have us discipline each one:

<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. (Ephesians 4:31 - 5:2, NRSV)

Put away from you all bitterness, Paul says. Put away that brooding that keeps you awake at night. Let go of it. Leave off that rehearsal of offenses we have suffered. Forsake the recirculation of wrongs done to us.

For by causing us to suspect that words spoken in one sense were meant in another, and gestures also, and everything, it infuriates and exasperates us, and makes us more distempered than madmen, not enduring either to utter a name, or to hear it, but saying everything in invective and abuse. (Chrysostom, XIV, Ephesians iv. 25-27)

Imagine our straits if God brooded over ours sins so constantly as we often brood over the faults of others! Why, if there were bitterness in God toward us, we would have no hope. But it is a Godlike thing, fully worthy of imitation, that we would give place in our bitterness to mercy. It is a Christlike thing to seek charitable interpretations of the deeds of our neighbor.(Luther, The Eighth Commandment.)

St. Paul continues with his survey of the dynamics of the soul. He has spoken of bitterness. Next he speaks of anger. Put off anger and wrath, he says. Do not stoke the fire within your soul -- that fire that would devastate others if you were

to let it loose. It is a good thing to hold anger in check. It is an even better thing to put away the anger. Relax your muscles; leave off imagining ways of getting revenge.

Next, the apostle speaks of sins of the tongue -- of wrangling and slander. Do not permit your anger to vent itself in slander or cutting words. The tongue, though it is a small part of the body, can wound the soul of others deeply, as St. James testified:

<sup>5</sup>So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! <sup>6</sup>And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup>For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, <sup>8</sup>but no one can tame the tongue-- a restless evil, full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup>With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup>From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. (James 3:5-10, NRSV)

Finally, St. Paul warns against malice. For Paul, malice seems to mean giving way to anger. Malice means striking with angry fist, launching of the plan of revenge, doing the sort of violence that could make you subject to the police and courts. Malice is letting wrath break forth from interior ruminations into violence in the world. Forsake malice. Be people of peace.

Then, because nature hates a vacuum, St. Paul urges that we replace the bad with the good:

<sup>32</sup>and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

And if we need to *pretend* in order to pull off kindness, then let it be. After all, the difference between pretending to be good and actually starting to become good is finer than any moral sleuthhound can sort out. (C.S. Lewis, if I remember right.)

Looking back over the flow of St. Paul's exhortation toward gentleness of speech, we can see that the foundation of his argument is Jesus Christ:

<sup>2</sup>and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us... (Ephesians 5:2, NRSV)

When Christ was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he was struck, he struck not in return. His works were to forgive, to heal, to encourage, to make saints from sinners, friends from enemies. His works abounded with love, and it is right that our conversation should display truth and gentleness that reflects that of

Him to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.