

Family Rules
Psalm 130 and Ephesians 4:22-5:2
Pentecost 12B

Our scripture reading from Ephesians this morning can come across as very moralistic: “Do not lie or steal. Put away bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander and malice. Be kind and tenderhearted. Forgive one another.”

All of this can sound very condemning and judgmental. But it is not so much a morality tale, or a pharisaic list of what to do and what not to do. This list of dos and don'ts is meant to demonstrate that following Christ matters.

When we have made the commitment to accept Christ into our lives...when we have made the good confession, entered the waters of baptism, and have vowed to follow Christ's example, we turn away from old behaviors and old ways of being in the world. When we are in community with other Christians, we act differently, we respond differently, we speak differently...we are different.

This list, provided by Paul to the church at Ephesus, as well as to North Christian Church, and every other Christian faith community that has ever been or will ever be, gives us some pointers as to how a faith community should interact with one another. After all, we are united in grace and love of God...we are a new community in Christ. How we treat one another, how we behave, how we speak should reflect that relationship, that commitment, to follow Christ.

How does a faith community act, respond, and be? Paul says: “this is how you respond. This is how you are.”

Now that you are followers of Jesus, you need to reflect the image of Christ in the way you act, live, and treat others. If you are a follower of Jesus, then your life has been transformed. You cannot say you follow Jesus and live your life in the same manner as before. Your behaviors, your actions, your words must also be transformed.

Paul says: “You are a new creation in Jesus Christ. Now, act like it!”

When we move away from old behaviors and old ways of interacting with others, and follow Christ's example, we are saying: I have decided to act differently because of whose I am. I have been claimed by God. I acknowledge that I respond differently and behave differently because of my baptism in Jesus Christ. In my baptism I have died to my old life, my old self, and am born to a new creation, a new identity.

Grace has been given and we do have freedom, but there is an expectation on how we live and how we treat one another. There is an expectation to live in a way that demonstrates that following Christ does matter. It makes a difference.

As The Message interpretation reads, in verse 24: “everything—and I do mean everything—connected with that old way of life has to go. It's rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces God's character in you.”

Paul then gives some examples of how following Christ should alter the way we live, behave, and interact. For example, The Message makes it clear, in verse 25, the reason why we shouldn't lie to one another: “Tell your

neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself."

Yes, that's right. We are all connected to each other. So Paul makes it clear that the reason that we don't lie is not because it's bad for our soul, on an individual level. Rather lying is wrong because we are all members of one church family. Lying damages relationships. Lying destroys connections. Lying obliterates community.

Likewise, thieves aren't reprimanded simply on the basis of their stealing. Thieves instead are asked to do honest work so that they can contribute to the community. As we read in verse 28: "Did you use to make ends meet by stealing? Well, no more! Get an honest job so that you can help others who can't work." Paul makes it clear: we are defined by how we contribute to the needs of the community.

So we are not simply to behave differently for our own sake, or for our individual benefit. When we accept Christ into our lives, and make a commitment to follow his example, Paul expects us to change the way we behave to benefit the community – the church family.

There is one more portion of this scripture passage I'd like to address this morning, and that is what Paul says about anger.

In verse 26, the text says "be angry." But it is not necessarily an imperative statement (although it's written that way). Instead, it is an acknowledgement. Whenever people live in community, at some point, anger will occur.

When Paul says "be angry," it's more of a "this is going to happen..." Be ready for it. It is not a denial of anger. And it's important that we, too, acknowledge this because too often, in the church, we don't let people be angry, because we are so focused on being nice.

This message to the church at Ephesus is saying deal with your anger. Cope with your anger. Don't avoid it. If you've got an issue, address it.

It isn't always pleasant, but anger needs to be dealt with. Not buried. Not stuffed. Not forgotten, without forgiveness.

As the Rev. Liz Arakelian, Pastor at Merrill Presbyterian Church in Merrill, OR writes:

Anger is a natural human emotion and not a bad one in and of itself. The problem is what we do with the anger when we do feel it.

Everyone reacts to anger a little differently. Some people sulk and get quiet. Some people scream and slam doors. Some people say harsh and mean things. Some people do all of these things and more. Anger can be a powerful and destructive thing. Anger can destroy families, relationships, and even lives. Even suppressed and buried anger can do very destructive things. So, if it is ok to be angry, where is the line when it goes too far?

According to Paul, even though we will feel anger, we are still supposed to not let evil talk come out of our mouths, but speak the truth in love and speak only things that impart grace. We are called to not let the sun go down on our anger because we should not burry [sic] it, let it fester, and hold on to it. We are called to deal with our anger in a constructive and grace-affirming way...

No matter what the presenting issue may have been, we should never let anger take over our lives or our relationships. Often, anger is a mask that keeps us from dealing with the real issues. It means we don't have to deal with the emotions that may have actually caused the anger in the first place. Being angry means we don't have to deal with why we are hurt, scared, or frustrated. It is important in the heat of the moment to not let words fly that you might later regret. Sometimes that means you need to take [a] break to collect your thoughts and calm down, and there is nothing wrong with that.

As Rev. Arakelian, and Paul both point out, anger is natural. Anger will happen. But we need to deal with our anger in a way that does not damage relationships or destroy community.

This whole passage from Ephesians reminds me of this popular trend right now...these "Family Rules" wall hangings that adorn entry ways and living rooms of many households in this country. You've seen these, I'm sure. They say things like: "In this house, we: tell the truth, respect each other, share, are kind, listen to each other, keep our promises..." It is meant to be a sort of reminder – a group affirmation-type tool for families to identify acceptable behaviors and ways of interacting. It is a covenant. Some of these wall hangings are even personalized. They say: "The Martin family: encourage one another, appreciate each other, practice kindness, work hard..."

In parenting studies, it has been shown that belonging is very important to children. Rather than reprimanding a child with "don't do that," it comes across differently when you phrase it: "that's not what we do." You are a part of the "we." You are a part of this family, this community, and that's not how we act. So if you want to be part of the we, then you need to act differently.

Well, our Ephesians passage is the original family rules. It is the family rules of the Church, the body of Christ, the family of God.

It is not moralistic in terms of don't do these things because it's not good for your soul. But rather, it is we don't do these things because that's not how this family acts. Others might do that, others might act in that way, but that is not how WE act.

And that is precisely what Paul is saying here. This is how we act.

The United Church of Christ, our partner denomination with whom we share in collaborative ministries, has its own take on this "family rules" trend. Theirs reads:

"Be the church. Protect the environment. Care for the poor. Forgive often. Reject racism. Fight for the powerless. Share earthly and spiritual resources. Embrace diversity. Love God. Enjoy this life."

We are a family. North Christian Church is a family. And families treat each other with honesty and respect. Families tend to each other's needs and contribute to the betterment of the group. Families deal with their anger in constructive ways.

As Richard Bruxvoort Colligan says: “For those of us with the ridiculous luxury of thinking of ourselves primarily as individuals, we could use practice in claiming one another.” We, as a faith community, as the family of God, as North Christian Church, should claim one another.

What, then, should be the “family rules” for North Christian Church?

Let us pray:

Living, loving God, you have claimed us and we are yours. Help us to behave in ways that demonstrate our commitment to following Christ’s example. Help us to treat each other with respect and honesty, and to always think of how our actions and behaviors impact the community and the family. Help us always to act in ways that build up this church community, rather than destroy it. Amen.