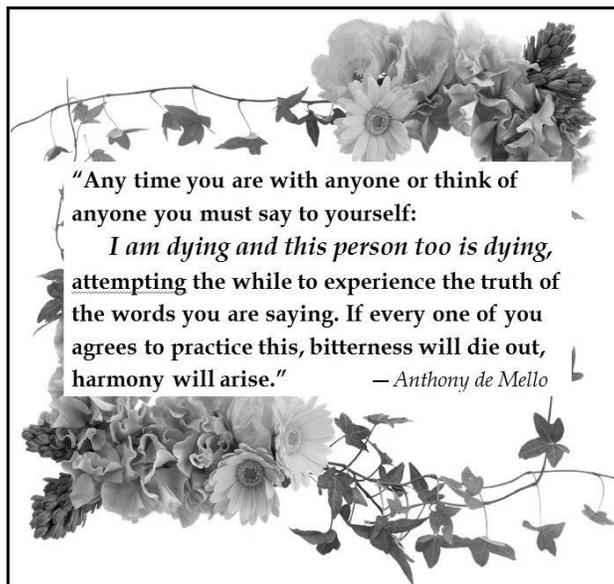


BITTERNESS VERSUS PEACE



Scripture:

Psalm 130

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. ²Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

³If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities Lord, who could stand? ⁴But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

⁵I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; ⁶my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

⁷O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.

⁸It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

²⁵So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸Thieves 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. ²⁹Let 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. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and 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!



A philosopher once said, "*Bitterness is unforgiveness fermented.*"

Paul said in this passage, "*Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling*

and slander, together with all malice....." Paul is teaching the church community of Ephesus how to get along by using as many words as he can come

up with to describe unforgiving and aggressive behavior.

BITTERNESS

How many of you here have ever felt bitter towards someone for something they did or said? Raise your hand. This is confession time! Yes, bitterness is a very common feeling!

Stephen Diamond, Ph.D., defines bitterness very seriously as “a chronic and pervasive state of smoldering resentment,” and deservedly regards it as “one of the most destructive and toxic of human emotions.”

All bitterness starts out as hurt. Your emotional pain may well relate to viewing whomever (or whatever) provoked this hurt as having malicious intent, as committing a grave injustice toward you, as gratuitously wronging you and causing you grief. Anger, and its first cousin, resentment, is what we’re all likely to experience whenever we conclude that someone has seriously abused us. Left to fester, that righteous anger eventually becomes the corrosive ulcer that is bitterness.

Bitterness is a common term often associated with divorce such as “a bitter divorce.” I am trying my best not to have one of those, so this sermon is preaching to me as well as to you all.

EMBODYING CHRIST IN OUR DAILY LIVES

Paul spent a lot of time explaining to the Ephesians what their identity in Christ was about. I used Rob Bell’s video and Marge and Bob Snater’s life journey together to show how to embody Christ in daily life.

Basically we are to prove we are Christians by our love. Our Christian identity gives us a Christian duty to have faith, always hope, and show love, these three. But Anthony de Mellow adds happiness to this list as well. (I’ll explain the happiness factor a little later.)

In today’s passage Paul emphasizes that where there is true faith there are deeds demonstrating that faith. He believed that we have no choice but to show our faith when it is truly guiding our daily lives.

When faith is guiding our lives, no bitterness, wrath, anger, slander or malice is found in us.

MALICE TOWARD NONE

That word “malice” is a word we don’t hear very often these days. A great role model in how

not to be bitter once said, “With malice towards none and with charity for all.” Remember who said that? It was Abe Lincoln in his second inaugural address. Unforgiveness and bitterness could have reigned supreme after the Civil War. But President Lincoln, who seemed to have all the New Testament memorized, knew how to lead our nation out of the Civil War without bitterness.

We can learn a lot from Lincoln’s humble but forthright speech that day, March 4, 1865. He was empathic to both the victors and the losers in the Civil war. He acknowledges the pain the South was feeling.

He said, “ with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who has borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

What an amazingly gifted mind! Then the President concluded with the “malice towards none” quote and he placed the responsibility for caring for the wounded, the widows and the orphans on everyone.

Abe Lincoln embodied Christ like no other president we have had thus far. Yet, he had the same call and vocation to be a Christ follower that each one of us has.

PASTOR LEHMAN STRAUSS

So how do we do we become the kind of Christians Paul describes to the Ephesians? Pastor Lehman Strauss, who retired as a professor at the Philadelphia Bible Institute, says it takes four qualities: humility, longsuffering, patience, and telling the truth.

1st Humility. Lehman says, “Humbling ourselves before others is the first step towards unity.”

2nd Longsuffering is defined as a gracious tolerance that never desires revenge. A revengeful spirit inspires disunity. Ask yourself: Are you long-tempered or short-tempered? Do you get in a heat easily or do you remain calm and serene under fire?

Gracious tolerance is a key ingredient for making peace with others.

3rd Patience or “**Forbearing one another in love.**”

This expression appears also in Colossians 3:13 where it means: to *bear* with, to *endure* or an extraordinary patience, (not your ordinary patience.)

4th and last quality to be a faithful Christian is to **Tell the Truth**. It is not enough to know and speak the truth. As the truth is told it must be manifested or born out of *love*.

**Pastor Lehman Strauss says:
“The wise person makes God the
doorkeeper of his or her mouth.
Let your speech be always with grace.
Wrong words reveal a wrong heart.**

Bitter water comes from a bitter fountain. Gossip and slander prevents us from being authentic Christians.”

HARD TO DO

All of this seems quite hard on a daily basis. Don't you agree?

When we are angry with someone and feel as if we have a right to be, how do we speak the truth and manifest it in love?

That is why we have prayer. To do these things well we must pray for the power, and while you pray you might see the person you are angry with as a confused child.

Or you might imagine the person as frail and dying as in the quote by Anthony de Mello. He reminds us that all of us are in the process of dying, some slower than others, but all of us are slowly but surely dying.

de Mello said, “Any time you are with anyone or think of anyone you must say to yourself: I am dying and this person too is dying, attempting the while to experience the truth of the words you are saying. If every one of you agrees to practice this, bitterness will die out, harmony will arise.”

Anthony de Mello was a Jesuit priest from Bombay, India who wrote over twenty spiritual books. Five were international bestsellers.

Yet, this is difficult because we are taught from a young age to be competitive and to compare ourselves to others.

BITTERNESS IS NOT HEALTHY

None of us desire to live this way. We know being bitter and hostile towards others is not healthy. Bitterness often masks underlying emotional distress by prompting a focus on the one who wronged you. In reality, we often don't have any control over the other person. We can only control ourselves.

When you make a decision about how to handle your anger and disappointments in others, remember what bitterness does to your health. It undermines our physical health with problems such as insomnia, high blood pressure, back pain, headaches, or abdominal conditions. The chronic anger that becomes bitterness can raise your stress baseline and overload your immune system.

Recent research quoted in the book, *Forgiveness is a Choice*, by Dr. Robert Enright, says: A study of 1,877 men working in an electric factory showed that bitterness over the long term increases heart disease. The workers who scored high in hostility in 1950 had much more heart disease in 1970 than those who scored low on hostility in 1950. And those who felt hostility towards others died earlier than the normal group.

Another study took part of the “bitter” group and taught them how to be more calm and more forgiving. The results showed clear health benefits to learning a new forgiving way of being.

FIVE STEPS TO ABANDON BITTERNESS

Dr. James Messina developed a five step plan to abandon bitterness:

- (1) Identify the source of your bitterness and figure out what this person did to evoke your resentful feelings; (You may have forgotten why.)
- (2) Develop a new way of looking at your past, present, and future—(reframing). Analyze how resentment has negatively affected your life and how letting go of it can improve your future. [Reframe the pain.]
- (3) Write a letter to this person, describing [their] offenses and effects they had on you, then forgive and let go of them, but don't send the letter unless you and your counselor decide it may be helpful now.
- (4) Visualize your better future having neutralized the negative impact of resentment.

(5) If bitter, resentful feelings remain, return to Step 1 and begin again. Don't give up until the bitterness is gone.

FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness enables you to let go of grievances, grudges, and resentment. It's the single most potent antidote for the venomous desire for revenge. So learning to forgive, *with or without staying in contact with the person*, helps your recovering from the wounds that were left festering.

However, forgiving does not mean forgetting. Abe Lincoln did not encourage those who survived the Civil War to forget all the suffering they had gone through. Instead, he told them to learn from the lessons of war and behave with compassion.

If someone has hurt you, you can forgive them without having to be in touch with that person again. But it does help to write a letter or call and set boundaries with that person so they can't hurt you again. The process of forgiving isn't meant to help them. Forgiving helps you.

Yet unless we can let go of our low self-esteem, grudges, and envy, it is hard to be a forgiving person. To be a forgiving person you must tap into your internal happiness and self-love.

THE LAWYER AND THE PLUMBER

Did you hear about the lawyer who was presented with a plumber's bill? He said to the plumber, "Hey, you're charging me two hundred dollars an hour. I don't make that kind of money as a lawyer." The plumber said, "I didn't make that kind of money when I was a lawyer either!" You could be a plumber or a lawyer or a business person or a minister, but that does not affect the essential you and who you are deep inside.

When you really understand this, no criticism can affect you. No flattery or praise can affect you either. Things come and go, and the value we place on them depends on our conditioning. How things are evaluated often depends on the mood of the person.

HAPPINESS

Do you want to be happy? de Mello believes that happiness is without a cause. True happiness can't be artificially created. You cannot make me happy. You are not my happiness. You say to an enlightened person, "Why are you happy?" and they reply, "Why not?"

Happiness is our natural state. Happiness is the natural state of little children until they have been polluted and contaminated by a bitter society and mean culture. To acquire happiness you don't have to do anything, because happiness cannot be acquired. We have it already. How can you acquire what you already have?

de Mello says to drop something. You've got to drop illusions. You don't have to add anything in order to be happy; you've got to drop something. Life is delightful. But delight can easily be overshadowed by illusions, ambitions, greed, and selfish cravings.

So to sum up: To become a truly happy person I must let go of the things that cause bitterness in my soul and live in peace with all. Heart disease-causing bitterness is washed away by forgiveness and loving yourself.

Finally, let's do a little exercise to get in touch with the happiness within that can combat bitterness and win every time.

Close your eyes and place your hand on your heart..... Visualize your heart as a delicate treasure, hand blown from the rarest ethereal glass. It is irreplaceable, priceless. Your heart is a treasure beyond imagining, fragile and precious. There is no other heart in the world exactly like yours.

Allow your breath to flow tenderly and deeply in and out for your heart. Make a commitment to cherish and appreciate your heart-self, and let the happiness you have within in every beat of your heart show on your face and shine out for others. Amen

Benediction: The true follower of Jesus will imitate God in love. God in love is God in action: We can never give ourselves exactly as Christ gave Himself, but we can imitate Him with lives of love for the good of our world.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forever more. Amen



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