

Finding words that give grace

Ephesians 4:25-5:2;

John 6:35, 41-51

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*O let me be your light to the nations, whatever others may have done,
with unkind words, with a gun, let me rise up like the sun
and shine your love all the way to the ends of the earth.*

(Christopher Grundy)

(For a list of the resources mentioned in this sermon, click here -
<http://www.memorialucc.org/about-us/469>)

We sang that song by Christopher Grundy a few weeks ago here after the shootings at the movie theater in Aurora, Colorado as a way to offer a bit of light in the darkness of that horrible event.

Here we are, singing it again after another mass shooting - this one only 90 miles from here, this one on a Sunday morning at a place of worship.

“Whatever others may have done with unkind words.”

Just think of all the unkind words that are part of the white power movement that Wade Michael Page immersed himself in over the years. The songs he sang were not songs of shining God’s love all the way to the ends of the earth, but songs reflecting the depths of hate that pervade the lives of those who find their meaning in despising others.

And *“whatever others may have done with a gun?”* The gun in the hands of Wade Michael Page tore into the lives not only of the six people he killed – and then was used to take his own life.

The gun in his hands tore into the fabric of a community – a religious community in Oak Creek, a human community that gathered over and over in the past week in solidarity with one

another, whether they were Sikh or Christian, Jewish or Muslim, atheist or Hindu or Buddhist.

We all sought to rise up like the sun on the day after this tragedy and on the day after that and once again this morning.

I can't imagine a better selection of scripture for a day like today than this little passage that Mary read from the letter to the early Christian church at Ephesus. It just happened to be the reading selected for use on this Sunday by the vast array of churches that follow what we call the lectionary – a three-year cycle of readings from the Bible.

I think it can speak to us not only in the aftermath of a mass murder in a temple but in the more routine but more slowly destructive ways we use words to destroy one another. It can speak to us about channeling our anger, sharing our goods and finding touchstones for what it means to live as followers of Jesus.

First, just a bit of context for this letter. It was written a little later than some of the letters collected in the New Testament. The Christian communities were becoming more established. The struggles were not so much to set themselves apart from the Jewish community they had emerged from, but to stand in distinction from the Greek and Roman world that surrounded them. What would make Christians different from the broader culture?

And this letter, while called the letter to the Ephesians, was probably written by a follower of Paul to be circulated among a wide number of early Christian communities as they all struggled with how to apply the meaning of Jesus' life and teaching in their own settings.

It starts with speaking truth to one another, not because we want to score points in some great debate, but because, the letter says, "we are members of one another." If we are not honest with each other, then we are not being honest with ourselves.

How we speak truth to one another matters, of course. This is not a call for blunt self-righteousness. It is a reminder that there are differences among us, that sometimes we see bad things happening and that we need to address them. Or, as the letter writer says, "Be angry, but do not sin."

I think we can sometimes pretend that being Christian means we should not give in to feelings of anger. This letter acknowledges not only that anger is a very real human emotion, but that it also has a place in our lives.

We should be angry when someone goes into a movie theater or a temple and starts shooting people. We should be angry when powerful people within business and within government are indifferent to the damage done to our earth by their actions.

We should be angry when people are pushed aside because of their race or ethnicity or sexual orientation or their economic status. We should be angry when the ruler of Syria wages war on his own people or the citizens of Palestine face daily humiliation at the hands of their occupiers. We should be angry.

What we do with that anger is critical. Rather than using that anger to demean others, to take away their humanity, we need to find ways to channel that anger into actions that will challenge injustice while preserving our integrity and the dignity of those we oppose.

There is not better example of that in our recent history than the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. It is not a perfect example, but it surely embodied the notion of being angry but in a way that sought to avoid adding new sins to the existing sin of racism and the violence it engendered.

There's a curious admonition in the midst of this passage. "Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands." I'm not sure what the issue was in the early church that prompted that. Were there really a lot of

early Christians who supported themselves by robbing others? I don't think so.

What's even more curious, though, is why thieves ought to start doing honest labor: "so as to have something to share with the needy." This is a recurring theme in the early Christian community.

You ought to be a responsible member of the community, earning your way as best you can. And then you ought to share what you earn with those who are not doing so well. It's that tension that we still live with today both in our own lives and in the political arena.

Have you heard the latest round of ads about welfare and work? Or have you followed the debates in the sharply different ways that two active Catholics – Joe Biden and Paul Ryan – interpret the reach social justice teachings that are part of both the Catholic and the wider Christian tradition?

Whatever your political viewpoint, the underlying tension is there. There is value in work. One side emphasizes that. There is value in sharing with those in need. The other side emphasizes that. The early Christian letter writer said that both are important.

In our contemporary political culture, there is not a lot of room for the phrase that comes next in this letter.

"Let no evil 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."

One of the remarkable things for me over the past week in watching the reaction of the Sikh community to the shootings at their place of worship, to the deaths of their leaders and friends, has been the lack of evil words coming out of their mouths.

Grief, yes. Distress, yes. But vindictiveness? No. Somehow, in public at least, they have managed to rise way above the hatred that Wade Michael Page carried into their midst.

Even as they gathered in shock in the parking lot around their temple in Oak Creek, while the police were still searching the building, they set up an outdoor kitchen to serve food and water to the first responders and to the growing crowd of reporters who had gathered. It was their tradition of hospitality at work.

And then listen to these words from Harpreet Singh Kapur, a member of the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek: “No matter what the shooter did, he failed, because instead of pulling us apart, he made us closer... We didn’t realize that we have such support from other members of society until this happened... We feel more close to other faiths and other religions now more than ever before.”

As the letter to the Ephesians said: *“Let no evil 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.”*

If the Sikh community could act and speak that way after such a horrendous assault, then should not we as followers of Jesus also be paying attention to ways to make our words give grace to others?

Within our community at Memorial, we have done a good job of that over the years. We have tackled difficult issues with care and respect for one another. This is one of the ways, just as it was for the early Christian communities, we can be a model for the wider society of how to handle disagreement.

We can be honest with one another without being destructive, we can work our way through differences while holding together as members of the body of Christ.

As many of you know, the Wisconsin Council of Churches has launched a statewide effort this fall called a Season of Civility. You can read more about that in the bulletin today. It’s designed to create safe places for respectful conversations across partisan

divides. In other words, how can we find words that give grace to others?

There are some good resources for this. I have mentioned before a book by Madison author Parker Palmer called *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. That book is at the foundation of the Season of Civility Project. A group of us here had a book group discussion of it earlier this year and if there is interest, we could have another one this fall.

If you want a more challenging read, try Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. He uses the field of moral psychology to explore these divides and to offer ways to at least understand one another.

There are links to both of these books and to some videos and interviews with the authors on our web site if you want to explore those ideas further.

But let me cite one other person who offered some very concrete ideas for political dialogue. I think his ideas fit into the wider question of how we choose words that give grace to others.

Charles Camosy teaches Christian ethics at Fordham University in New York. Last month, he wrote a column for *The Seattle Times* that I came across while sitting at my cousin's kitchen table out there. It was called "Five Tips for a Civic Discourse."

Here they are in brief. I think they are helpful whether we are engaging public issues or personal disputes. (There is also a link to the whole column on our web site.)

First, he calls for humility as we enter into contentious subjects. He writes: "We are finite, flawed beings and are prone to making serious mistakes." Or there's my mantra – "Yes, that's what I think, but I could be wrong."

Second, he calls for solidarity with our conversation partner. Assume you might learn something from the other person. Get to know them a bit personally if you do not know them already. Don't demonize them just because they disagree with you. Or as the writer of the letter to the Ephesians put it, "do not make room for the devil."

Third, says Camosy, don't reduce every issue to having only two sides. Things are more complex than that.

Fourth, stay away from dismissive words and phrases like "radical feminist" or "war on women" or "tree hugger" or "anti-science."

And finally, lead with what you are for rather than with what you think the other person is against. You may find that you have similar ultimate goals and the disagreement is more about how to get there. That leaves room for both of you to give a little in the conversation.

Is this a foolproof way of finding words that give grace to others? Of course not. But it's a start.

Would this approach have worked with Wade Michael Page? Of course not. We need to be on alert for those whose hatred of others runs so deep, whose mental balance is so distorted, that they threaten others. But thank goodness, the Wade Michael Pages of the world are rare in our society.

In the end, according to the letter writer to the early Christian communities, what we need to do is give up those things that we use as defense mechanisms to separate us from others – bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and malice.

Instead, we need to embrace kindness, to be tender hearted, to learn forgiveness just as Jesus showed us how to forgive and showed us the abundance of God's love and grace and forgiveness.

That's not work that is done in a day. It's not work that ever ends. But on this day, we can recommit to rejecting the things that divide us and embracing the things that give grace to ourselves and to others.

We can do that in many ways, but one way is by singing again the song we began with. In the midst of whatever hatred and violence we encounter in our world, let us be like the rising sun and shine God's light to all the ends of the earth.