

## If You Have Nothing Good to Say...

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost - August 12, 2018

### Ephesians 4:25-5:2

4:25 So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

4:26 Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,

4:27 and do not make room for the devil.

4:28 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.

4:29 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.

4:30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

4:31 Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,

4:32 and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

5:1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,

5:2 and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God

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Lorem ipsum, two words (l-o-r-e-m i-p-s-u-m) is the name for “placeholder text” that is used by page designers in the print industry. It’s called lorem ipsum because those are the first two pretend words in a whole standardized text full of nothing but pretend words that is used in the layout phase of page design. This “lorem ipsum,” this nonsense text is later replaced by actual text, but in the page design phase it is precisely the meaninglessness of the lorem ipsum that makes it useful, because the designers eye can focus exclusively on layout without being distracted at all by real words. In other words, the value of lorem ipsum is actually that it says nothing at all.

My sermon title is the first half of a saying that, I would dare say, can be completed by 99% of you who are here in this sanctuary and those who are watching online. Let’s test that. The saying is: “If you have nothing good to say....[*say nothing at all*].”

The fact that we can all complete that saying indicates that we all have probably internalized a cultural truism, that “saying nothing at all is better than speaking when you have nothing good to say.” But is that true? For many of us, that truism, in the present contentious reality in which we are living every day, is being tested.

Is it really true that, in circumstances about which we have nothing good to say, our value is that we say nothing at all? Scripture like we’ve read this morning from Ephesians may convince us that saying nothing when we have nothing good to say is even a “Christian” value. But is it? Is retreating to lorem ipsum, saying nothing, our only solution? Does the bible tell us so?

First, it is helpful to hear Ephesians as a letter addressing new Gentile converts, whom we might compare to the man who experienced a spiritual conversion at a local mission. He had been living on the street. He admitted that he was always intoxicated when he showed up for help. But one day he sat in on a bible study at the mission and he was profoundly moved to become a follower of Jesus.

He describes that experience as the "big turnaround" though his past habits and influences and struggles didn't just instantly vanish. Like the Gentiles addressed in Ephesians, he was learning and growing through simple and practical instruction and through association with people who were a little further down the road of Christian discipleship.

Instruction like this in Ephesians is good, but we know that the Christian life is more than a matter of deportment and speech. It has a lot more to do with to whom we give our allegiance. And allegiance to Christ means that no context is one where we have nothing good to say.

Ephesians offers simple principles for how we should talk. Verse 29 might begin with the *lorem ipsum* principle "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths" -- but it finally fills the space with real words and meaning -- say "What is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear."

Our words and conduct are necessary, and they are evidence that we really do try to follow Christ, far more convincing than our polite silence.

An apocryphal story about the legendary Polish composer-pianist Paderewski [pod-u-revsky], illustrates how we might always have something good to say.

The story refers to one of Paderewski's American concert tours, which were always high-dress, high-society extravaganzas. In the audience one evening was a mother with her 9-year-old son. The mother hoped that seeing and hearing the great pianist would inspire her son's practice at the piano.

The son became squirmy waiting for the performance to start and slipped away unnoticed while his mother socialized. He was drawn to the ebony concert grand Steinway on the stage.

That huge crowd suddenly went silent when the 9-year old began to play Chopsticks, and that silence was followed by hundreds of frowning faces and voices yelling "Get that boy away from there!" and others shouting their disapproval.

Backstage, Paderewski overheard the commotion and quickly moved onto the stage, and reaching around both sides of the boy, began to improvise a countermelody to the boy's Chopsticks, whispering to the boy, "Keep going. Don't quit. Keep on going." Well now, of course, the crowd became enthralled and adoring.

And so it is that we hammer away on our project to speak virtuously and live a holy life, and sometimes it seems we do no better than a 9-year-old pounding away at "Chopsticks." And about the time we're drown out by disapproving shouts and become convinced that it would be best if we would just be quiet, along comes the masterful spirit of Jesus present in our learning and growing, and through simple and practical instruction and through our association with one another, people who are on the road of Christian discipleship with us, that spirit of Jesus joins us, reaching around us, improvising a counter melody, whispering "Keep going; don't quit. Keep on going."

You know what they say: "If you have nothing good to say..." Oh wait. We always have something good to say. And the touch that the spirit of Jesus brings, added to our effort, turns the whole performance into something that blesses the world around us.

"Keep going. Don't quit. Keep on going."