

“Walk in Confidence: You are Beloved” based on Ephesians 4:17-5:2, Psalm 4
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on August 15, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

NOTE: Pastor Drew will be including a transcript of the sermon from the previous Sunday in the mailing for the upcoming Sunday each week. You can watch the service on Facebook or YouTube.

Psalm 4, which we read today is one that is traditionally said to be written by King David, though some scholars disagree. Now, unlike the Ephesians text, which is also disputed, and for which, I have reasons to side with the scholars who say that it is Paul’s letter, the truth is that I have no reason for siding with King David as the Psalm’s author. No reason, except that I like having a specific author to think about, simply because it makes the Psalm more relatable, much like how the specific stories in country music, tend to make these songs more relatable too.

So, I think it is better to think of David when contemplating this Psalm, just as it is good to think of Paul when contemplating Ephesians. And so, we see in this Psalm a picture of David being very angry and upset in the beginning. *How long will you mortal children turn my glory to shame? How long will you love vanity and seek lies?*

David is upset here that fellow humans are undermining his work. They are loving their own vainglory, something that is empty, and seeking lies, instead of the truth of God’s presence. I think we can all identify with the kind of frustration expressed by David – I know I can. In a world where expertise and orthodoxy are challenged at every step, by those longing to stand out and prove their own ‘research’ as the hidden truth we’re all missing. It is easy to grow upset and let anger determine how we interact and yes, how we address today’s issues in community with other humans. It doesn’t take long to find examples of this on social media, where angry discussions are the norm.

In my career, I have worked in three areas of expertise that were once valued in our culture, and which now, seem to be under attack constantly in my Facebook newsfeed. Journalists, those who work in politics, and religious leaders once had credibility, but now, people with no experience in these fields share opinions, written as bumper sticker-like summaries we call memes, that often carry more influence with people who know me, than anything I can say from my experience and expertise in these professions. I’m not alone. I’m sure lawyers, teachers, professors, doctors, and scientists can all understand what I’m talking about.

Recently, a friend with whom I was very close while living in Northern New York, posted a sensational meme about a bill in the New York State Legislature, claiming that a proposed bill from several years ago was about to become law. The details are inconsequential because this bill has had no widespread support. So, I pointed this out, and corrected the summary of its contents, which looked bad but are not as nefarious as he suggested. Rather than accepting my experience and expertise, he ignored me and shared it two more times, where others chimed in to echo his anger.

Needless to say, this provoked me to anger, and all I wanted to do was engage in a fight in the comment feed. How dare he ignore my expertise and experience for love of vanity in seeking lies? But, fortunately, in my preparation for today, and this is a good reason to read scripture. I had these verses in my mind. I set my phone down and refrained from engaging, and just went to bed. In the morning, I was tempted to get back on his Facebook page, but I knew from David’s & Paul’s words,

not to feed my anger, because ultimately, it is God who is in control, and nothing I could say would change his mind. I simply prayed that God would do it, knowing God loves me, and that my job in life is to love God and this person regardless.

To speak the truth in love is not to disengage from the problems in this world, nor is it to fight with people to try to force them to share your vision of the truth. How many times have you ever fought with someone and changed their mind? It doesn't happen. Compare that to the number of times you have loved someone regardless, and by your constant presence in their life, you are able bear in love with them, even as they struggled to accept the truth you have shared for their sake. To this, I think of friends who struggle with addiction, and even though it is destroying them, and you don't see change, still it seems my friendship remains as one blessing.

You see, people do change, but it is not our reasoned arguments that change others. Rather, it is the grace of God alone that truly has the power to transform people. This grace is shared through our love and our showing of grace toward others. To be angry solves absolutely nothing. I believe Psalm 4, which we read today, is the structure of Paul's words, seen in the quotation he makes from it about anger, and also in its shared language.

But notice that Paul is not demanding his audience change but reminding them of what Christ is doing in them. Last week, we saw Paul's vision for the church, and now he's narrowing it down, making it applicable to our lives. This is what David is doing for himself in the Psalm, and now Paul does it for the church. You see, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, David expresses his anger in prayer, but then pauses. David pauses and reminds himself of the truth that he longs to glorify and calms down. David starts by demanding an answer from God, but cools off, by remembering that the faithful are marked by the Lord, and so, he knows that the Lord will hear his prayer. He trembles, in Hebrew, or is angered, in Greek, but he chooses not to act, but rather he chooses to meditate in bed, be still. His advice is to do sacrifices of justice and trust in the Lord.

In his letter to Ephesus, Paul is primarily addressing Gentile converts who believe in Jesus. Earlier, in Chapter 2, he said that they had once been outsiders to faith in Israel's God. They had been alienated from community with Israel and God's covenant promises. But now, by their faith through the grace of Jesus, they are made insiders. And so, Paul acknowledges them as belonging in the church, and from this, he advises them not to act as the outsiders do. Notice, he uses the same word from Psalm 4 – vanity – and expounds upon this a little bit more.

As David was likely speaking of the vanity of insiders, tied to Israel by their ethnic heritage, Paul now is pointing to the fact that these Gentiles, literally people from other nations, are a part of Israel by faith in Jesus. This is the faith outlined in last week's reading, namely that the One True God is known to us as the Father, Son and Spirit, and this is revealed in the Son coming down to us in Jesus, sharing in our humanity, living within our limits, to die for us, and then rise again, sharing God's life with us, present still by the Spirit of God in and among us, as a church of Gentiles from many nations, and the Jewish believers with them.

Diversity can bring conflict among us, if we let it do so, but the gospel of God with us in Christ unifies us. You see the words we meditated on last week – humility, gentleness, patience and empathy – present for us the foundation of repentance, of turning to the Lord and not our vanity.

In the words we read today from Ephesians, we see a practical application. Namely, that it is not our job to justify ourselves, or even justify the truth. The only justification we need is faithfulness to the One True God. And so, true repentance is to set aside our excuses for our sin, to stop trying to justify the mistakes that we make, and just tell the truth, confident of forgiveness.

When we walk in the vanity of our minds – making excuses as our justification for sin, we walk like outsiders and remain in darkness, shielding our sins from God’s light, which exposes it. We estrange ourselves from God who pursues us with grace and love. We ignore our need for God with hardened hearts, only to become numb, and we give ourselves over to whatever it is we think we want, which is fueled not by the gospel, but by impurity and greed. As Paul said, this is not what we learn from Christ. We are human, but we are to become new. By grace, we become a new type of human.

There is a saying we love to throw out in Christian circles – love the sinner, hate the sin. But this is a distortion, because it assumes we can separate the two in others, when the reality is that we have a hard time separating the two within ourselves. The only way to separate the sin from the sinner is by the grace of Christ. And so, to actively hate the sin in someone else is to judge them. Bringing them to Christ, though, through an understanding of grace, is key. Namely the gift of God sharing in our humanity to die, and then rise again to give us a new life, is the only thing that demands a response.

Paul urges his readers to respond to the grace that they now know is at work in their life, by shedding the excuses for their sin, the old way of being human according to deceit, and instead, step into the light putting on the new humanity according to God, which is, as he takes language from Psalm 4 about offering right sacrifices, when he says to be created, or recreated in the God-sanctioned piety or holiness, of justice and truth, in order to put away lies, our excuses. We trust God for us to be able to speak this truth with our neighbors.

Ultimately, we are not individuals. We think we are. Our culture tells us we are, but we are not. No, we are members of each other, connected, through God in Christ’s humanity. And so, Paul makes his most explicit quote from Psalm 4, which is difficult to translate. In English, it is often rendered, ‘Be angry,’ but this is mistaken for permission. In the Greek, it is a middle verb, meaning that it is likely reflexive, which again means that it is directed toward ourselves. Most accurately, it might be best rendered in haughty language, ‘Be yourself angry.’ No one talks like that so it doesn’t get translated like that.

But here anger is an emotion, as in a provocation to anger, not a state of anger. Paul says to get rid of, and it’s a different word here, any state of mind that is angry by nightfall, expanding on David’s words in Psalm 4, verse 4, about going to bed to meditate and be still. Through David and Paul, the Spirit says not to fuel anger, or remain in an angry state of mind. Paul says that this gives opportunity to the devil, which in Greek means ‘the divider.’

Then, expanding again, Paul warns against some of the behaviors we indulge in, when we think that we are justified in and of ourselves. Here he says the one who steals, should steal no longer. In your bible, again because it is hard to translate, it may say thief. But most accurately, this could be translated as ‘filching,’ but do you know what filching is? I didn’t, but I do now. It isn’t a thief who

robs a bank or mugs a person on the street. To filch is to casually take things that don't belong to you, kind of like the classic example of taking office supplies home from work, when you think you are underpaid, because this evens the score. Instead, Paul says to work until you are exhausted, and to take any extra you make to give to the poor.

Paul then says that if you are a believer who is taught in Christ, be careful of your words. Don't speak words of judgement, but rather words that build others up, so that, as I said earlier, we might give the grace, or unmerited favor of God, to others, sharing what we have been given through Christ. Paul cautions against grieving the Holy Spirit, making God sad, because we are marked by our faith and our baptism, like David said, for redemption. If we really believe this, Paul says, we should act like it.

So, rather than telling the Ephesians to call out the sins of outsiders that cannot be separated, he tells them to work on the sins within themselves, which can be separated now, but only because we are the ones who claim to already know the grace of Jesus. Here Paul seems to ask the impossible, but notice it is an odd command. He does not as he did earlier say 'Put off' or 'take off' these sins. Instead, it is passive – *Let* all bitterness, rage, anger, clamor, and slander, *be removed from you*. Indeed, this is not our action, but God's action by grace that removes our wickedness.

And it is by this grace, we become kind, tenderhearted, and can then extend grace to others. From humility, gentleness, patience, and empathy, we live into our calling, and by grace we let God remove from us our sins, so we can stop making excuses for them, and repent, turning to God instead of to the vanity of our minds.

In the Psalm, David says many will ask, 'who will show us goodness' and David asks for the light of God's face to shine on us. Here Paul again, seeming to follow the Psalm, expounds on this, through the glory of the incarnation, for just as God shared in our humanity, by this we share God's light. Remember also, Jesus said he is the light of the world and said we are too. We are to reflect God's image into the world around us, or as Paul puts it, we are to become imitators of God, and to live our lives, or literally 'walk,' in love.

Friends, if you heard nothing today, hear this – You are the beloved of God. God loves you. You are beloved because as Jesus shared in our humanity as God's beloved, by faith, we share in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and in God's life. So then, know that you are loved by the Father, forgiven in Christ, and indwelt by the Spirit. You have no need to make excuses for your sin. Walk in confidence by imitating God, so that rather than being angry and judgmental of the world, you will reflect God, by being kind, tenderhearted, and gracious to others, just like Jesus. Amen.