

PENTECOST 12B – 8/12/18
Where The Rubber Meets The Road
(Ephesians 4:25-5:2)

I turned 17 in the spring of my junior year of high school. Here in New Jersey – at the time, at least – this meant that I could now also get my driver’s license.

Today in New Jersey, however, if you’re 17, you can only get a “probationary” license, from what I understand, which prohibits you from driving between the hours of 11:00 p.m. and 5 a.m. And the only passengers allowed in your vehicle are your parents, legal guardians, or dependents. You then have to wait until you’re 18 to receive an “*unrestricted*” license, which now allows you to drive at *any* time of the day or night, and with no passenger restrictions.

But back then, however, there *were* no such distinctions. If you simply passed both the written test, and also the actual driving test, then you got your license – with absolutely no restrictions whatsoever...

Now it’s been said that teenage boys all pretty much like the same three things: sports, cars, and girls – and not necessarily in that order, of course! For me, though, it was only 2 out of 3. Sports and girls. Cars? Eh... Not so much.

You see, unlike my peers, both guys and girls *alike*, I really didn’t care that much about cars, or even about the thrill or prospect of driving itself. Now don’t get me wrong, I certainly wanted to *get* my driver’s license when the time came, just like everyone else. But it was primarily for

the freedom that it would afford me to go places on my own; the independence that *came* with driving, in other words. And not necessarily the experience itself.

So, as a consequence, and unlike all of my friends, I really didn't spend that much time in the months leading up to my 17th birthday dreaming about, or practicing for, the big day. Oh, I went out driving with my parents a few times, on my permit. And I practiced parallel parking over here at church. As a result, then, of this apparent indifference on my part – not to mention my obvious lack of practice-time – my parents, to be perfectly honest, didn't hold out very much hope that I would actually *pass* my driving test when the time came.

So when a friend of mine approached me about driving him and his date to the junior prom – which was taking place less than a month *after* my birthday, and therefore *also* after my driving test – I went home and asked my parents, and they immediately said, “Sure!” Again, thinking that this was a rather safe bet on their part; pretty much a sure thing in fact, because they never, *ever*, in a million years, thought that I would actually *get* my license on the first try.

In other words, they could come off as the cool, hip parents by saying “Yeah, sure!” because they figured it was a done deal that I would fail, and so it didn't really matter if they said “Yes” or *not*. It was kind of a moot point. A win-win situation, they figured. Getting props for saying “Yes.” But knowing all the while that I would fail and that, therefore, in the end, I couldn't and wouldn't actually be driving to the prom after all. Pretty ingenious on their part, I must say.

Also in their favor was the fact that I would actually be taking the test driving their '68 Dodge Polara. In case you don't remember, it was a really long *boat* of a car that barely fit inside the parallel parking cones. And so when I kept knocking over the cones that we'd set up while practicing over here in the church parking lot, I'm sure my parents felt that the probability of my failing the driving test was pretty much like money in the bank!

Ahh... but, you see, they didn't take into account the positive power of incentives and pressure. And there were plenty of incentives. Chief among them was driving myself to the prom instead of having to ask one of my parents do it. Not to mention, impressing my date for the evening. And then, when it came to pressure, there was that little matter of promising my friend (whose girlfriend was best friends with *my* date, hence the request) who was now counting on me to come through!

Well – cutting to the chase – the day of reckoning, the day of my driving test finally came... and, lo and behold, *I somehow passed!* And my parents, to their credit, kept their word and let me drive to the prom. And even take the other couple with me.

I know, however, that it probably got them all worked up. In fact, I'm sure it did! But they hid it pretty well. Yet, they did remind me – countless times as a matter of fact – about the importance of driving *safely*... and remembering everything I had been taught in driver's training.

You see, it was one thing to *study* about driving, and then to take a driver's *test*. Just as it was one thing to *practice* driving, and even go out and drive with a permit because there was an *experienced* driver

in the car with you to step in and intervene if and when you made a mistake.

But it's quite another thing to actually go out and drive *on your own* for the very first time, isn't it? It's that moment "where the rubber meets the road," so to speak.

Now we've all heard that expression before: "where the rubber meets the road." Firestone, in fact, used it for years, in a "literal sense," to advertise their tires. They were selling the idea that what really counted in driving, in terms of comfort and safety, was what happened when their tires made contact with the pavement.

But, in a more general or "figurative sense," the phrase *also* refers to the point at which a theory or idea is put to a practical test, right? Or actually put into practice, you might say. For example, runners can train hard and extensively for weeks, even months. But it isn't until the *race* – again where the rubber meets the road, so to speak – that they will discover just how good they really are, and also when they will finally be able to tell if all that training and commitment has actually paid off. In other words, it's that moment of truth when something is about to begin or at least *get serious*...

Now for the first three chapters of his letter, the writer of Ephesians – whether it was the Apostle Paul himself or simply one of his followers, we don't really know for sure – has gone to rather great lengths to explain God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. But now it's finally time to talk about our *response* to that plan. In other words, what God's plan means for us in *practical* terms; in everyday terms, daily-living terms

In Ephesians 1:7, for instance, we read that “In (Christ), we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace...” And in 2:14, that Christ has broken down the walls of hostility that divide us. Great news! Absolutely wonderful news!

But *now*, here’s the thing, what does all that mean for daily living? What are the practical implications, in other words, for how we are to lead and to conduct our lives? And so, as it turns out, that’s *precisely* what’s been laid out for us in today’s reading; in essence, where the *rubber* of the gospel hits the *road* of daily life...

Opening with the words, “So then...” our reading this morning, in the verses that follow, begins to highlight, *specifically*, what the life of a Christ-follower will look like. Again, in very practical, down-to-earth, everyday terms.

“Putting away falsehood,” we hear, “let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” After all, honesty is the best policy, right? We were all taught that as kids. We need to be “straight” with each other. We have this obligation to be truthful with one other. But it’s not always easy, though, is it?

The Johnson and Johnson company, for example, once had in their mission statement that employees would “operate with honesty and integrity.” In fact, just several weeks before a major incident involving Tylenol, one of their bestselling products, the president of Johnson and Johnson had sent a memo to the heads of all the divisions in the company asking if they believed *in*, and were abiding *by*, that mission statement. And all of the responses came back affirmative.

Shortly thereafter, however, a serious problem developed with Tylenol involving poison-laced capsules that then led to seven deaths. At the time no one knew if they had been tampered with or not, which, as it turns out, they *had* been. But not knowing this at the time, the company had a huge public relations crisis on its hands. And yet within an hour of first hearing about the problem, the president of the company, knowing that it was a one hundred million dollar decision, immediately ordered *all* Tylenol capsules to be taken off the shelves.

When reporters later asked him how he could so quickly and easily make such a major decision, he simply replied, “I was just practicing what we agreed on in our mission statement.” Well, as Christians, says today’s reading, truth-telling and honesty are part of *our* identity and commitment as well, even when it’s difficult. We have an obligation to tell the truth to each other. It’s part of *practicing* what we preach, isn’t it?

Our reading then continues... “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.” My former seminary professor and advisor, Wally Taylor, in his Commentary on Ephesians, suggests that a *better* translation of this verse might be “*If* you are angry, do not sin.”

Now all of us know what it’s *like* to be angry, don’t we? Anger is often associated with frustration and other powerful emotions like feeling hurt, being frightened, disappointed, worried or embarrassed. What’s more, *unchecked* anger very easily escalates into inappropriate behavior if we’re not careful. Which is the very reason for this warning: If, or even *when*, you are angry, do not let that anger cause you to do something you will later regret. In other words, practice self-control and self-restraint.

Nor should we let the sun go down on our anger, it says. In other words, to “hold onto” to it. Because if we hold onto our anger, what happens? It just festers and grows, and our resentment deepens, and the likelihood of that anger then being expressed inappropriately at a *later* time grows exponentially.

Instead, just let it go. Let the anger go. Why? Because *not* to do so, not to let our anger go, says our reading, is to – in effect – make room for the devil in our lives...

Verse 28 then says that “Thieves must give up stealing...” Interestingly enough, the Greek word for stealing here is *klepto*. It’s where we get the English word, “kleptomaniac,” from, referring to those who have a mental illness that compels them to steal things.

Now, at first glance, this one doesn’t appear to relate to most of us. There’s an important thing to point out, however. In the early days of the Christian church when everyone, including Paul himself, fully expected Christ to return at virtually any moment, the temptation, and therefore the danger, was to sit back and do nothing, and just wait without contributing anything to the community; that is, without working to provide for themselves and others.

Well, nearly two thousand years later, we certainly don’t have *that* expectation or problem anymore, do we? But we can still learn something from the *second* half of that verse, though. In other words, to labor and work honestly with our hands. Why? So as to have something to share with the needy, we’re told. Once again, we have an obligation to each other; in this case to *care for* and *support* one another, especially the weakest and most vulnerable among us.

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths,” says our reading, “But only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”

Robert E. Lee was once asked what he thought of General Joe Johnston, a fellow officer in the Confederate Army. Lee rated him as being very satisfactory and even made several glowing comments about him. The person who asked the question seemed perplexed. “General Lee,” he said, “I guess you don’t know what Johnston’s been saying about you.” Lee answered, “Actually, I do know... But I was asked my opinion of *him*, not his opinion of me.” Let only what is useful for building up come out of our mouths...

“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit.” In his retirement, Thomas Jefferson founded the University of Virginia. Because Jefferson trusted that students would take their studies seriously, the code of discipline, at first, was a little lax. Unfortunately, his trust was misplaced when the misbehavior of students actually led to a riot in which professors, who had tried to restore order, were physically attacked.

The following day a meeting was held between the university’s board, of which Jefferson was a member, and the defiant students. Jefferson began his remarks by saying, “This is one of the most painful events of my entire life.” Suddenly he was overcome by emotion and burst into tears.

Eventually, the board asked the rioters to come forward and identify themselves, and to take responsibility for their actions. Surprisingly, nearly every one of them did. Later, one of them explained why when he said, “It wasn’t Mr. Jefferson’s words, but his tears.”

The writer of Ephesians is reminding us here, in verse 30, that our sinful behavior *grieves* God's Holy Spirit, just as the actions of those students *grieved* Thomas Jefferson. Seen in this light, recognizing that our sinful behavior saddens God so deeply... we ourselves should be moved to repent and to change our ways...

So, therefore, our reading continues with the writer imploring Christians, "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice... and be *kind* to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving* one another as God in Christ has forgiven you."

Forgiveness, of course, begins when we give up the quest to get even. This is very difficult, to be sure, because most of us are pretty good at keeping score in life, aren't we? We want those who deserve it to get their just rewards. It's why the concept of "karma" is so popular, even among Christians. In other words, the belief that what goes around, comes around.

Sometime ago, a fellow by the name of Dave Hagler, who works as an umpire in a recreational baseball league, was pulled over for driving too fast in the snow out in Boulder, Colorado. He tried to talk the police officer out of giving him a ticket by telling him how worried he was about how it might affect his insurance, and how he's normally a very safe driver, and so forth. The officer told him that if he wanted to contest the ticket, he could always take the matter to court.

Months later, during the first game of the baseball season, Dave Hagler was umpiring behind the plate when, you guessed it, this very same police officer came up to bat! As the policeman was about to step into

the batter's box, they recognized each other. There was this long pause. Then the officer asked, "So... how did the thing with the ticket go?" And Hagler, the umpire, responded, "Well... let's put it this way. If *I* were *you*, I'd be swinging at every pitch!"

The natural impulse, of course, is to get even. But, as Christians, we're called to forgive... just as we have *been* forgiven...

Finally we come to the end of today's reading and *these* powerful and inspiring words: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us, a *fragrant* offering and sacrifice to God."

The author Rita Snowden once wrote about her visit to a small town near Dover, England. She was having tea outside, late in the afternoon, when she became aware of an unbelievably pleasant scent filling the air. So she asked her waiter about the source of this scent and she was told that it came from the people passing by. He then went on to explain to her that they worked in a perfume factory just down the street, and were on their way home. When they left the factory, he said, they carried with them the *fragrance* that had permeated their clothing during their day's work.

Rita Snowden immediately saw this as an illustration of what the church could be when it's at its very best. We should be a people who similarly allow ourselves to be *permeated* with the fragrance of Christ's love and presence, she noted. Then, as we go forth in the world and in our daily lives, the fragrance of Christ would go *with us*. And all the people we come into contact with might experience something of God's fragrance *through us*.

That's the hope, at least. That we might share that fragrant offering, who is Christ, with a troubled world so gripped by sin and despair. To be a bright spot in an otherwise sin-darkened world...

The bottom line of today's reading? How we act, how we conduct ourselves, how we treat people... *matters*. It really does matter! The Christian life is where the rubber meets the road, so to speak; where it's put into actual practice; where the rubber of the *gospel* meets the *road* of daily living...

Oh... and just so you know. I drove to and from my junior prom without incident, and delivered my passengers safely back home at the end of the evening. Much to my parent's great relief, I might add... Just thought you'd be interested.

Amen.