

## **Ephesians 4:17-32**

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. 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. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

## **A God Fashioned Life**

Cardinal Emanuel Celestin Suhard was a French Cardinal of the Catholic Church. He served as Archbishop of Paris from 1940 until his death, and was elevated to the cardinalate in 1935. During WWII, he was detained in his residence for speaking out against the Nazis and the inhumane deportation of Jews in Paris. He is best known for two quotes:

1. "To be a witness does not consist in engaging propaganda nor even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist."
2. "One of the priests' first services to the world is to tell the truth."

I'm going to return to these two quotes, because I believe they point directly to our text from Ephesians today.

Now it may seem to us today, looking back at history, that Cardinal Suhard was doing what every other clergy person was doing in the face of Nazi Germany—living out and speaking the truth in the face of tyranny. But, surprisingly, this was not the case. Few Catholic priests had the courage to speak against the Nazi regime, and when the war was over, many, like Cardinal Suhard, were not welcomed back into the diocese. Cardinal Suhard gives us a 20th century example of living a God-fashioned life.

In speech or sermon-writing, even in letter-writing, we are encouraged from an early age to avoid using the same word or phrase more often than necessary. Paul wasn't taught that lesson in oratory school during the

Roman Empire. In chapters 4-6 of this letter, he uses the word "therefore" 9 times. I mentioned last week how important this word is in Paul's letters, as it points to a transition of sorts. As the Bible was translated by scholars from its original languages throughout the centuries, and into English, later scholars found other words that could imply this transition, such as what we have in the NRSV today: "Now this," and later "So, then." Still, the word therefore is important, because it intricately connects us and our place in the church to the One who Created the church and calls us. Eugene Peterson points out that this "therefore" at the beginning marks a shift in focus for Paul—the spotlight is now on us. He goes on to comment:

Spotlight might not be the best word, for we are never the center of what is going on in the Church. God is. Paul's therefore's keep us mindful of our connection to everything that has gone before. We are not on our own. Church is not a job in which we are given the responsibility of managing and adapting to whatever we see that needs doing. Church is already complete, in the words of the Nicene Creed: "one holy, catholic, and apostolic."

If we want to live a God-fashioned life, we've got to hold this connection, this "therefore" in the forefront of our minds.

Paul encourages us to no longer live as we used to live, but this seems like a no-brainer to some of us, right? You know that you're supposed to try not to sin, you know you're supposed to be kind, you know you're supposed to try to live according to God's will for your lives. That's nothing new, right? So what *is* a God-fashioned life?

Let's return to Cardinal Suhard's first quote: To be a witness does not consist in engaging propaganda, or even stirring people up. As we sit here in our 138 year old sanctuary, singing hymns that are both known and maybe not so known, practicing a liturgy that is familiar to us, not trying to "entertain" but have an experience with the divine, the first part of this quote might make sense to you. As witnesses we should not engage in a quick-fix type of theology, a sort of "if you do this, you'll get this" propaganda. But think about the second part of this clause: To be a witness does not even mean stirring people up? Now I don't know about you, but for me, that's a little bit of a toe-stepper. After all, haven't we talked about how the Gospel is supposed to turn our worlds upside down, and if it does, shouldn't we as witnesses stir people up?

Here's where the spotlight moves, friends. When we think like this, we upstage God.

I've mentioned to you before that I have always had a love for theater, and it started at an early age. A few years before I would become a spotlight operator at the Newberry Opera House, I had big dreams of being on stage. I auditioned for several plays with the Newberry Community players, and had some fascinating roles, believe it or not! I was a tree in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. I was the letter Q in the Letter People—guess what that stood for! I was the arms of Audrey II in Little Shop of Horrors—that was fun! I was a chorus member and dancer in West Side Story, who was asked not to sing quite so loud. And my big break was my first speaking role, the persnickety Aunt March in Little Women. Before I landed the role of Aunt March, I never

knew what “upstaging” meant, because I didn’t have a chance to do it! But look out world, here I came! I don’t remember much of the rehearsals after the first one that was for my first scene. I bounded onto center downstage and delivered what I thought was the greatest line yet, only to have the director yell “CUT!” and ask me if I understood the stage directions. See, Aunt March was supposed to come in the back door, stand in the back, and wait to be addressed by Jo. Oh, well. There went my big break.

When we place the responsibility of stirring people up squarely on our own shoulders, we upstage God at work in the world. Rather, Cardinal Suhard says our lives should be mystery, a way of living that would not make sense if God did not exist. That’s pretty powerful stuff, friends. A God-fashioned life is not the best dressed label, or a life of standing the the spotlight of church, but of this mysterious “I want whatever she has” aura that we give off to the world.

Cardinal Suhard also says that “one of the priests’ first services to the world is to tell the truth.” Now, having been a Catholic, it makes sense that he would understand this in terms of his vocation. But I believe that in the second part of our text, this is exactly what Paul is saying to all of us. After all, as Reformed Christians, we believe in the priesthood of all believers. Once again we have a “therefore” moment. “So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” Again we see the organic connection between us as the Body and Christ as the head of the church. In *The Message*, Peterson elaborates on this verse: “What this

adds up to then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself."

Isn't the the truth? My parents used to warn me that it was harder to remember a lie than the truth. Which is true and good wisdom. But if we continue professing lies to others, the same lie over and over again, eventually we come to believe it as truth, at least on a conscious level. Paul warns us against this.

This section is titled in many versions "Rules for the New Life." Once we've shed our old lives, we have a new set of rules to live by. The next rule may surprise us. We are told to "be angry but do not sin." Again it's worth looking at *The Message* for some clarity: "Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use you anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to be angry. Don't give the devil that kind of foothold in your life."

There is much going on in our world to be angry about. When people apologize to me for their anger, I often remind them that Jesus turned over tables in the temple over the extortion of the money changers. Anger in and of itself, if rightly placed, is not the sin. The sin is when anger turns deep. When anger creates revenge and hatred. When anger outweighs our love for God and for justice and for kindness. That's when we have to check and make sure we are living into this new life.

At the end of our passage, we see the guiding principle for a God-fashioned life: We are to be kind to one

another, to be tenderhearted. To forgive, just as we have been forgiven. I'm aware that these things might seem easier said than done, friends. But remember—we are not doing these things on our own! We can't upstage God and think that we have to create this kindness, compassion and forgiveness all on our own! No, if being a witness means living a life of mystery, acting in such a way that world without God doesn't make sense, then we are *partners* in this work, friends! And that is a God-fashioned life. A life clothed in the love of God. Clothed in the hope that comes from God. Clothed in the compassion that God has shown us, so that we might show the world. Amen.