

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

WALK THIS WAY

In the Mel Brooks' movie *Young Frankenstein* there is a scene based on a gag that has been used by comedians for years. Young Dr. Frankenstein has just gotten off the train at Transylvania Station. He meets his servant Igor (not Eegor) and they start off toward the carriage with the baggage. At which point, Igor says, "Master, walk this way." Igor, a shriveled little hunchback, limps along with his walking stick, while the good doctor follows along walking tall and dignified. They go two steps and Igor turns around and says, "No, no, Master, not that way, walk this way! This way!" And so the doctor hunches over and limps along behind Igor.

As I remember it, when the Marx Brothers did the same gag, a shapely young woman told Groucho to follow her, and as she turned to go, she said, "Walk this way." She had a distinctly feminine way of walking. At which, Groucho said, "If I walk that way, I'll be going to jail."

"Walk this way" has been used as a straight line to set up and introduce gags which guarantee laughter. And yet, the notion of following someone – walking the way he walks, mimicking what she does, copying their every move, "do as I do" – is ancient advice. Even more to the point, the Apostle Paul instructs Christians in Ephesus and everywhere else to "walk this way!" He tells us to "be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

You might recall that the Apostle Paul always began his epistles by making theological affirmations about God (especially as God is revealed in Jesus Christ) and what God has done for us (especially through Jesus on the cross and beyond the empty tomb). In the latter half of his letters, St. Paul then gave ethical exhortations to the church. If we believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, then be sure to behave in a certain manner. Walk this way! For the Christian life is both word and deed. We profess our faith and then we act on our beliefs.

Just prior to the text for today, Paul tells us to put off our old nature, which is corrupt, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. The verbs put off and put on reflect the imagery of an early baptismal practice in which a person's old garments were set aside in order to put on a new white robe, symbolic of the new clothes of righteousness and a new identity in Christ. Because their status had been changed in baptism, these new Christians were able to lead new lives and walk this new way in Christ. And, the same is true for us as well.

Because of our new and eternal life in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, we too must walk differently in the world. According to St. Paul, we need to put away false lies in order to speak the truth. While there are times that righteous anger is justifiable, it should never get out of control. Former thieves, who have put on Christ and now walk in newness of life, must no longer steal but labor honestly with their hands – not merely to provide for themselves and their families but also to have more than enough so as to give to those in need. Our speech should not be laced with evil; instead, our words ought to edify and import grace to those around us. We are called to let go of all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice. Wow! That's a tall order but Jesus means business!

In short, we are to watch what we say, to build up and not tear down. I have always appreciated this short, but straight-to-the-point poem entitled *Watch Your Words*:

A careless word my kindle strife;
A cruel word may wreck a life.
A bitter word may hate instill;
A brutal word may smite and kill.
A gracious word may smooth the way;
A joyous word may light the day.
A timely word may lessen stress;

A lovely word may heal and bless. (Author unknown)

In this passage, the Apostle Paul turns from the negative to the positive. After he tells the Church across the ages to put away all the filth and unholy words, he then accentuates the good in place of the bad. If we walk this way (the way of the risen Lord Jesus Christ), we will strive to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Whether fiction or fact, I really can't say; but I do know this - it makes for a good story! When Leonardo da Vinci painted the Last Supper, da Vinci made Judas' face to resemble the appearance of his personal enemy. As the artist thought of how much he hated this man, it was easy to paint his Judas. However, when da Vinci came to paint the face of Jesus, he had great difficulty; he had artist's block. His eyes would wander to the face of his enemy, and those feelings of anger made it impossible to concentrate on the beauty and purity of the Christ he wanted to paint. Finally, da Vinci took his brush and painted out the face of Judas and reconciled himself with his enemy. Then, and only then, was da Vinci successful in painting the face of Christ. (Once again, if that story isn't true, then it should be!)

We are called to forgive, and, by doing so, we live up to our high calling to be imitators of God. Furthermore, when we act like God, we are called to walk this way, which translated means to live in love. After all, God is love, and Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. We are motivated to “put off” evil and “put on” righteousness because we believe in the One whom God sent. We forgive because God in Christ has forgiven us. We love for the very same reason that God in Christ loves us. Now notice that the Apostle Paul doesn't tell us to do all these things in order to be Christians. Rather, he tells us to do all these things because we already are Christians. He doesn't say, “You ought to do all these things so that you can be good enough for God.” Instead, he says, “Do these good things because God has made you good.” The text doesn't say, “You ought to act like somebody special.” It says, “You are already somebody special, so act like it!”

We are to walk this way and none other. As we act like God – by talking, walking, living, and loving just like Jesus – we will become the “little Christs” to our neighbors that we are meant to be.

For thirty-three years, Yul Brynner was the King of Siam in the Rogers and Hammerstein musical, The King and I. We are told that in the earlier years Brynner was made up to resemble the part of the king. However, by the time he reached his sixties, he no longer required the make-up. He had become the part.

We too are called to play our part within God's unfolding drama and so become a part of Christ Jesus at work in the world. After all, we are his disciples. This is how we are to walk – to walk in love with and for the world because that's how Christ walked. He loved us, and he loves us still. He gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering. If we are to imitate God, through Christ, we must yearn to be a pleasing and fragrant offering to others.

Rita Snowden tells of a delightful holiday that she spent in Devon, England. She was sitting at the window of the house where she was staying and suddenly the air seemed to be filled with fragrance. It was so noticeable, so striking, that she asked herself where on earth it could be coming from. She looked out of the window and all she saw was ordinary people walking up and down the street on their lunch break. So she went out on the street and the fragrance was even stronger. So she asked her hostess, “Where does this fragrance come from?” The hostess said, “Don't you know? These people all work in the perfume factory just up the street. They live in the fragrance all day and when they come out at lunch time, they bring the fragrance with them.” (as told by Dr. Clayton Bell)

That's precisely what the Apostle Paul is saying to us across the centuries. We have eternal life; and, as we live in the presence of the risen Christ all day long, let us give off his lovely fragrance to the world, to one another. Put off the old... put on the new... forgive as God forgave you... imitate God... love as Christ loves you... be a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. And, “WALK THIS WAY!” – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens, First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA ,April 26, 2009 (early worship service)