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Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

“Brittle Class Faith”

Let me begin by asking a few questions, but you don't have to answer them out loud. How often have you found yourself counting off days on the calendar figuring out when your next paycheck or pension check will finally arrive? Does it often seem that there are too many days between pay periods? Do you know people who are living from paycheck to paycheck, and if that paycheck wasn't available, they would be in serious financial trouble? If this were a Baptist church, I'd have you turn to your neighbor and say "I know someone like that." Then I'd have you turn to your other neighbor and say, "Lord, have mercy."

When we talk about the American economy, we tend to divide people into three groups: lower class, middle class, and upper class. However, given the recent economic hard times, another class has been identified in American society. It is called the "brittle class," because their financial position is so fragile. Brittle class folks are people who are one bad luck event away from being in big financial trouble: one illness or large hospital bill, one major car repair, one weather catastrophe, one job layoff. If any of that happens, they find themselves out of Middle Class and downwardly-mobile into the Brittle Class. These are the working poor. To be brittle class means you are constantly finagling and bargaining and doing battle with collection agencies of all sorts. It means being afraid someone will repossess your car, kick you out of your house, or worse, take away your kids. It means lousy jobs and inadequate pay and jumping through the hoops and waiting in line after line trying to qualify for government assistance because you just don't have any other options. It is stressful and it involves hard choices and painful sacrifices.

The recent recession has made the Brittle Class more widespread than ever. We all know people, including some of us, who are one bad bill away from financial ruin. Is there something in scripture for the Brittle Class of our church? Yes, there is much in the bible that offers help and hope for the Brittle Class, including today's lectionary passage from Ephesians. Remember that the people in the early church in Ephesus were not wealthy, country-club folk; they were not the bigwigs in the synagogue or the high-class merchants in the Greek marketplace. They were widows, slaves, young, old, mostly of limited resources, living as people cast out to the margins of society because they were willing to "regard everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord" (Phil 3:8).

This passage from Ephesians describes five vices we should avoid and five virtues we should seek to follow. For example, we should put away lies and falsehood, not let the sun go down on our anger, stop stealing, let no evil talk come out of our mouths, and put aside all bitterness, malice, and gossip for such things grieve the Holy Spirit. All these moral instructions make for nice, juicy sermon material, but the gospel is about much more than just doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong. The people of the

early church, like the apostle Paul, Timothy, Eunice, and Lydia, did not risk everything just so they could score a bit higher on tests of moral uprightness. There is something much larger at stake here – something linked to putting away an old self in its entirety and clothing ourselves with an entirely new self after the likeness of Christ.

Picture this image: In the early church, candidates for baptism would gather outside just before dawn to make their professions of faith. They would first face the west with its dark horizon and renounce the power of darkness and evil. Then they would turn to the east at sunrise, at the birth of new light, and proclaim their allegiance to Jesus Christ, the light of the world. They literally stripped off their old clothing and put on new garments, symbolizing their adoption by Christ as children of God through baptism. Then they were received into the community of faith.¹

It is that depth and richness that makes the bible far more compelling than just reading it as a book of moral instruction. Hear again the first verse from the Ephesians passage: *“So then, put away falsehood; let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.”* Put away falsehood, not because telling lies is wrong, not because being disingenuous is unkind and disrespectful and a sin. The verse goes much farther than that. Put away falsehood, because we are members of one another. You are literally harming another who is intimately connected to you. It is like the hand telling a lie to the foot, the liver telling a lie to the pancreas, the heart telling a lie to the soul. So closely knit together are we in Christ, that we must put away falsehood.

There’s another good example a few verses later in the passage – verse 28 where it says, “Thieves must give up stealing.” Now that seems like good advice. Stealing breaks one of the Ten Commandments. Why else should they stop stealing? Is it because other people have gained their possessions through hard work, and therefore it is wrong to take someone else’s private property? No, that’s the rationale of the world’s logic. That’s the reasoning of capitalism and secular law. Scripture calls us to labor and work with our own hands, not so that we might pile up possessions, but rather that we would each have something to share with the needy. We work not to accumulate, but so that all we do might help us face east into the light, sharing with those in need beside us and thus fully participate in the ministry of the risen Christ.

The connection between this passage in Ephesians and the hard reality of people today living in the Brittle Class occurred to me while listening to a radio report on NPR by commentator Kai Ryssdal. The report described people in Muncie, Indiana who were going through hard times – folks who were raised middle class, that is, they had earned a decent income, had a pension and health care plan, and made enough money to own their own home, but who now found themselves struggling to survive. Good factory jobs were gone. Or a health crisis had changed everything. And now they found themselves battling every month to pay the bills and hold off the creditors, jumping through hoops and getting worn down in the process. They were the working poor with little chance for improvement, the chronically unemployed lacking the education and technical skills to survive in today’s job market.

At the end of the radio report, I listened for a word of hope. And though it was clear that their answer was incomplete, the commentators took us to a Baptist church basement. There a group had gathered to take part in a local anti-poverty program called “Teamwork for Quality Living.” When someone truly wants to commit the time and energy to move toward improving their lot in life, they are assigned to a Teamwork “circle”, where they are then matched with 3 or 4 people called “allies” who will support them in their quest toward self-sufficiency. It is not really mentoring; it is more like befriending – giving the person a sense of stability and support so they can work out a plan and be encouraged to stick with us by people who honestly care about them. For it is precisely this type of social network that so many people in the Brittle Class lack.²

Scripture does not offer quick fixes for people whose social networks have collapsed, who live in worlds where work is not available for their skills, where sound health care options are not affordable, and where bad financial decisions take years to correct if ever. And as the events of the past week remind us, we know there is no quick fix for the sad, irrational act of a loner who took his anger out in an act of violence against innocent women in a L.A. Fitness workout room – neither to prevent such pathological isolation nor fully protect women from such violent crimes. But what scripture offers is a fundamentally different perspective, like turning away from the western horizon in order to face the east and the rising sun.

We do what is right out of a new identity as followers of Christ, the risen Lord. We do what is right by grace, imitating Christ, taking to heart the wisdom of our faith. So yes, there is much we can learn from these verses in Galatians. We are to speak the truth to one another, for we are members of one another. We are not to give in to demonic, irrational anger. We are to labor and work honestly so that we have something to share with those in need. We are only to speak what is useful for building up, seeing everyone we meet as someone in our circle dedicated to “teamwork” and “quality living.” And we are to be kind, forgiving, and compassionate for such is the example of Christ who pulled us up from our brittle class existence and set our feet upon solid ground at last.

AMEN

¹ G. Porter Taylor, Feasting on the Word, Proper 14 (Ephesians 4:25-5:2), *Theological Perspective*, 326.

² American RadioWorks and Marketplace, Kai Ryssdal, “Hard Times in Middletown,” August 2009 (Transcript – <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/muncie/transcript.html>)