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**TEXT: Ephesians 4:25-5:2**

In our last *Mere Christianity* class last Thursday night, we talked about becoming the kind of Christian man, the kind of Christian woman God would have for us to be. C.S. Lewis, the author of the book, used the word “pretending,” saying that if we want to become more like Jesus, we need to pretend we’re like Him, even if we don’t feel like being, e.g. forgiving. In other words, fake it until you make it. Some class participants didn’t like the word “pretending” because it connoted for them being “two-faced” and, of course, as Christians we need to be genuine and authentic but what Lewis meant when he used the word pretending was that we need to be doing the right thing even if we don’t feel like it—and as we do the right thing, the feelings will often follow. I like to use the example of exercising: If I waited until I felt like exercising, I’d never do it. No, I must will myself to exercise—because it’s the right thing to do—and very often in the process of doing it, and certainly afterward, I’m glad I did it. Mary used another example, going a little different direction. She said that a teacher with high expectations for a student will very often help that student to achieve more. If that teacher sees something greater in the student than that person him or herself sees, very often that student will rise to the expectation and become something other than what they knew or dreamed they could be. Lewis called it “pretense into reality.”

Well, we’re encountering this sort of thing when we read our Epistle Lesson this morning. Please turn in your Bibles to Ephesians, Chapter 4, starting with verse 25. Ephesians 4:25.

Paul was in prison at the time he wrote this letter to the church at Ephesus. Mind you, he wasn’t guilty of any crime. He had been put there by his political enemies—a reminder to us that not everyone who is in jail or prison deserves to be there.

Paul had established the congregation a few years earlier, on his third missionary journey through the Mediterranean. Paul was a church-planter and had stayed in Ephesus for three years getting

this church-plant off the ground. He still had great affection for this fledgling congregation and was worried about its well-being.

This letter to the Ephesians is like many of the letters he wrote his mission congregations. It can be divided into two parts: theology and praxis. (Post on screen). Paul's standard structure in all of his epistles is to remind his readers, in the first part of the letter, about the theology or doctrine he'd taught them. He will talk about Christ and the nature of Christ and salvation and heaven and our inheritance as Christians. A lot of theory, a lot of doctrine.

But then, in the last part of each of his letters he discusses praxis. Someone define praxis for us. (Solicit a definition.) Yes, it means practice, putting into action the theology he's just outlined. It's the practical, working-out, how-to part of the Christian life. And that's what we're dealing with in today's lesson.

Notice our text this morning, verse 25 of chapter 4, starts with the word "Therefore." He's about to launch forth with the application of the theology he's just presented. The word "therefore" is like the hinge on a door swinging open to lead us from one room into another. The rubber is about to hit-the-road. We're about to step out of the classroom and into the world. He's presented the Gospel—that we're saved not by what we do but by God's grace through our faith—and now he's about to tell us how we are to live in response to the salvation we already have. Let's be clear about that. He's not saying, "Do this so God will like you and save you." No, God has already saved us in Christ. Now, in response to what God has already done for us, let us live like this...

A lot of people, myself included at times, have read these words as instructions to individual Christians. While you can read this text in that way, really, Paul was addressing this letter to the congregation. He was talking about their behavior as a community. He was saying, "This is what the body of Christ, a congregation of Christians, should look like.

I'd like us to pretend now that Paul is writing this letter, this praxis portion of his epistle, not to the church at Ephesus but to the church at Holbrook, and to our congregation in particular. Let's

go through this passage, section by section, and pretend that he's writing to us here at Peace Lutheran.

He begins: "Therefore, each of you..." That means you Jeff and you Tina and you John and you Irene. "...each of you must put off falsehood..." In other words, don't lie. (Project that on wall.) Each of you—Betty, Kory, Don, Michael—must "speak truthfully to his neighbor..." (Project Do: Be truthful on wall.) A Christian congregation, if it is to be healthy and if it is to be a good witness to the world, needs to be able to believe what the other says. We have to be able to be able to trust each other. Back in verse 15, Paul tells us that the truth needs to be spoken in love—in other words, kindly, not viciously—but truth needs to be told. Liars are not to be tolerated.

Verse 26: We are not to let our anger lead us to sin. (Project on wall.) It's OK to be angry, sometimes we need to be angry about things that are wrong. Jesus Himself was angry with what was going on in the temple, but we are to have control of our anger and not allow our anger to lead us to sin. We are not to let the sun go down on our anger—in other words, we're to deal with those people or issues that make us mad. (Project on wall.)

Now that's easier for some of us to do than others. Some of us are introverts—I'm talking about you Lois and you Mary and you Yolanda. Some of us non-confrontational—I'm talking about you Gail and you Mike and you Alex. Some of us are people-pleasers—I'm talking about you Vicki and you Katie and you Anthony. You don't like conflict and you want everybody to be happy so when there's a problem with someone or an issue that makes you mad, rather than deal with it—speaking your mind, confronting the person who has hurt you, standing up to someone who you think is wrong—you bury it. You keep your mouth shut. You allow the sun to set and you're still smoldering. Paul is challenging you here, good people. Paul's not saying you don't have a right to be upset—no doubt you do. Paul is telling you, for the sake of the body of Christ, be proactive, take action to resolve the problem—and don't wait until tomorrow. Do it now. Paul says in verse 27 that when we don't deal with issues that or people who upset us, we give "the devil a foothold." Don't allow unresolved issues to weaken your spiritual life.

Thieving must stop. (Project on wall.) What a blessing we have here at Peace in that we have such trustworthy people counting our money (Irma and her crew) and paying our bills (Katie)! At the church I served on Guam before coming here, we had to fire, and prosecute, a secretary who embezzled several thousand dollars from the congregation before she was caught. My experience of people here is that you are scrupulously honest, thank God. But even outside of the congregation, e.g. in your work, think what it would do to the reputation of our congregation if, for example, you, Junior, were found guilty of theft at Love's, or you, Gretchen, in your work at YFC, if you were found guilty of pocketing some of the kids' money for your own purposes. We must be scrupulously honest—or the witness of the congregation to which we belong, and the Church as a whole, will be affected.

To that end, Paul encourages us to “work, doing something useful with (your) own hands.” In other words, don't be a freeloader. Do you know that Paul himself, in order to avoid any charge that he was living off the largesse of any of his congregations, worked as a tentmaker, literally making tents? He didn't want anyone accusing him of skimming off the top, taking advantage of people's generosity. (Project on wall.)

And why should we work? So we “have something to share with those in need.” In other words, we are to be generous toward those in need—genuine need, not need because of laziness. Here again, I see example after example of generosity within our congregation. I'll refrain from citing individuals in order to avoid embarrassing either the donor or the donee but suffice it to say that we are a generous people. I'm very proud of you for your big-heartedness.

But let's be careful how we talk. (Project on wall.) Now, what do you think Paul means when he says, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths?” (Solicit response.) Yes, gossip, speculation, unflattering speech (even if it's true), vulgar jokes, cursing, even, I think, extreme sarcasm and cynicism. Some of you have told me of previous congregations in which gossip was a huge problem—so much so that you left that church. Yuck! We don't want that here.

Instead, what do we want? “Only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” Someone rephrase that. (Solicit response.) Yes, our talk should be encouraging, fortifying, uplifting, inspiring, challenging yes, but in a positive way. And here is where I think our times of fellowship are so important. When we talk with others of our congregation, before and after church, during the coffee fellowship, and at fellowship events, we should make a point not just to chit-chat but to sincerely inquire about the other and be willing to listen to what the other is saying. He or she may have a burden you could share or something good that’s happened, over which you can rejoice with them. They may have a problem you could help solve or you may make a promise of prayer for a solution (and then remember to pray). We can show genuine interest in another’s work or child or future plans—and, if appropriate, offer a little counsel. Too often, I think, we put our own comfort or our own schedule or our own pleasure first--and fail to be the upbuilding person-to-others God (through Paul) is calling us to be.

We’re told not to “grieve the Holy Spirit.” Now, what do you think that means? (Solicit responses.) Yes, I think grieving the Holy Spirit means all these things, and more. Sometimes I like to think of the Holy Spirit as the more motherly, nurturing Person of the Trinity. Think of your own mother, assuming you had a good one. What about your behavior would grieve her? If your mother was to find out that you were cheating, lying, being unfaithful, engaging in perversions; if she was to discover that you were being abusive or being abused; if she was to learn that you were being lazy, or mean-spirited or wasting your money or your talents, wouldn’t she grieve? In the same way, I think the Holy Spirit is grieved when we do any of these things or simply aren’t living up to our potential. At the end of verse 30, Paul reminds us of a little theology, name that we “were sealed for the day of redemption,” meaning that God has big plans for us. Therefore, we should live up to them.

Here’s a series of don’ts (project on wall): Don’t be bitter, rage (meaning out-of-control temper), be angry (we’re talking about unrighteous anger here; there’s a difference), brawling, slandering, practicing malice. What would a church look like if all these terrible behaviors were taking place? Well, it wouldn’t be a church would it? And it certainly wouldn’t attract anyone, leading them to God. And yet I understand that there are some congregations like that—not ours, thank God!

But here's what would attract others (project on wall): Kindness, compassion for one another, forgiveness toward one another—and here Paul reminds us of our own forgiveness by God. This kind of community is sweet. This kind of congregation is compelling. This kind of church is pleasing to our Father. This is the kind of congregation of which I want to be a part, don't you?

What does this look like in practice? Let me make a few suggestions. I think the people of this kind of church smile a lot. They aren't afraid to hug—in fact, they practice it, a lot. In this kind of congregation, there's a good “buzz” in the air when you come to worship—or any kind of class or meeting. People are glad to see each other. People are chatting with each other. There aren't little groups clustered away from the others, whispering and looking over their shoulders, worried that they'll be overheard. People in this kind of congregation are introducing themselves to people they don't know—and introducing newcomers to others. They're offering the other to go first in line. They're helping the infirm up and down steps and in and out of cars. They're following up on previous conversations, wanting to know the status of health or grandchildren or work. They're in corners, praying for each other. They're apologizing to each other if there's some concern over offense. They're offering rides to doctors, bringing loads of firewood, remembering birthdays and anniversaries, they're providing food to the sick or laid up. People in this kind of congregation are not focused on their own belly buttons; but have genuine concern about others and go out of their way, and sometimes out of their own comfort zone, to engage with others and help build-up the body of Christ.

They are aware, as Paul concludes in the first couple of verses of chapter 5, that they are “dearly loved children” of God and, as such, they're striving to be like their Father—wanting to please Him. They're not trying to earn His favor, because they know they already have that; instead, they're trying to “do Him proud” because they just love to please Him—and in so doing discover peace and joy for themselves. They are living “a life of love,” as it says in 5:2, patterning themselves after Christ's sacrificial love. Because they're so enamored of Jesus, members of this community are seeking to be like him—to be “imitators of God.”

The text goes on—Paul's praxis, or the living out of the Christian faith—continues but we're going to stop here for today. I think we have more than enough to chew on for one week.

Let me conclude by going back to what I brought up at the beginning, this matter of pretending until our pretending becomes reality. Bill Jeffers, in the *Mere Christianity* class, said that he'd prefer the term "practicing." Instead of pretending which, he said, connotes two-facedness, Bill said Christians needs to keep practicing the Christian life and, as we practice, we become more proficient, closer to being like Christ. We talked about this last week, didn't we, when we talked about sanctification, growing up into Christ the Head.

Certainly we need to be doing this as individual Christians, but today, I'm encouraging us to do this as a community of believers, as a congregation of Christians, as the church. In grateful response to everything that God has already done for us, let us practice what God (through Paul) has taught us this morning and in so doing, become a more "fragrant offering" to God. People of Peace, I'm so proud of you in so many ways but always, we could do better. Look at your own life and the way you conduct yourself as a member of this congregation—and consider what you could do more, or less, or better to help build-up this family-of-faith known as Peace Lutheran Church. I urge you to do this, not for the sake of the congregation, but for the sake of the Gospel and the witness of the whole Church. May our love for one another be a "fragrant offering" to God and may others outside of our congregation be able to look to us, like unbelievers did looking at the early Church and say, "See how they love one another." Amen.

#### Do

- Be truthful
- Useful work
- Share with the needy
- Speak only what is edifying to the Body, encouraging others
- Be kind
- Forgive each other
- Be imitators of God
- Live a life of love

#### Don't

- Lie
- Let your anger lead you to sin
- Stay angry; deal with it—that day
- Steal
- Talk in an unwholesome manner
- Grieve the Holy Spirit
- Be bitter

- Rage
- Be angry
- Brawl
- Practice slander
- Be malicious

Songs:

Opening & Psalm  
Before/After Gospel  
Sermon  
Closing

“10,000 Reasons (Bless The Lord)”  
“I Am The Bread Of Life” (ELW#485)  
“Jesus, Lord, We Look To Thee”  
“We Are A New Creation”