

Sunday, August 8, 2021

Sermon: Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy

“Do Not Grieve the Holy Spirit”

Ephesians 4:25 – 31

Have you ever been warned, “Do not embarrass me in public”? “You are not going out like that are you?” “Remember there are people here who know me.” Well, in Ephesians Paul says, “Don’t embarrass the Holy Spirit.” At least that’s my rendering of “do not grieve the Holy Spirit.” The Message translates: “Don’t grieve God. Don’t break his heart.” J. B. Phillips puts it: “Never hurt the Holy Spirit.” Can we face the possibility that the churches are embarrassing God? Any Christian using language to denigrate, hurt, or intimidate sticks to all of us like Velcro. We are one body. We are one body, one people. And we are embarrassing the Holy Spirit while lacking the common sense to know that we are embarrassing ourselves.

I almost entitled this sermon “Aristotle and My Mama.” She didn’t know Aristotle, but she would have liked him. Aristotle and Mama will make appearances in my sermon.

Paul seems to think that we are capable of embarrassing God in public with our public displays of nasty language and disrespect of others. Can we at least entertain the idea that we are embarrassing God? When we weaponize our language to attack others with insults, threats, mockery, sarcasm, we are not just acting like immature frat brothers, we are offending the dignity of God – the Logos – the word.

In the context of the phrase “do not grieve the Holy Spirit,” there are actions that are potential candidates because of proximity. I put a lot of stock in proximity because once a group of my childhood friends engaged in an action that was probably illegal and bordering on criminal. When the facts came out, and my mother knew I was present, she grounded me and lectured me profusely. I protested, “But I didn’t do it. I didn’t do anything.” Undeterred, she insisted, “Maybe so, but you were there.” To my mother, proximity meant aiding and abetting. She would have made a great prosecuting attorney.

Here are the actions in the proximity of “do not grieve the Holy Spirit.” Falsehood and telling lies. Anger that is sinful and unforgiving. Making room for the devil’s work. Stealing and not sharing with the needy. Evil talk and ungracious words. Bitterness. Wrath. Anger. Wrangling. Slander. Malice toward others. In short, the Holy Spirit is grieving over how Christians are treating one another. Christians are using words as weapons to hurt, to intimidate, and put down others. Look words matter and they can do lasting damage to people.

Facebook’s own computer programs can’t keep up with the vitriol. Facebook Jail is overcrowded with anti-social criminals. People are treating fellow Americans as enemies. We are talking people who want to divide this nation. Right and left sides are growling about secession. Look, I’m from the South and we tried secession – a miserable failure. We are the United States of America and not the Untied States of America. People who once were neighbors, went to dinner together, attended the same cocktail parties, talked politics, sex, and religion together, now actively despise and hate one another. This is true on both sides and even the placid people, the “don’t get upset,” “why can’t everyone get along” moderates are angry. This grieves the Holy Spirit.

This doesn’t mean that we should give up criticism because criticism is valid and necessary. Like a two-headed Janus, in one head we are vicious, in the other we are sensitive and easily get feelings hurt. Criticism now passes for persecution, but good criticism is like a mid-flight correction. Criticizing another person is not the same as being judgmental. Criticism takes place in conversations and dialogue not in rants and condemnations. I have noticed that if you criticize someone for lying or for spreading misinformation, there are those who leap to accuse you of judging unfairly or of being a hypocrite.

Aristotle to the rescue perhaps? At the risk of sounding like a 17th century professor of rhetoric, I want to show you that there are some negative strategies that should not be part of a Christian’s vocabulary. Some people, ignoring the substance of your argument, launch a personal attack (*ad hominem*). It corresponds to Paul’s word, “slander.” For example, I suggest that a report is not true, and a “friend” responds, “Kennedy, you are a brain-dead woke liberal.” Other people will resort to threatening you with violence (*ad baculum*). Or we will be told, “Everyone agrees with me.” This is *ad populum*. An appeal to the public, the majority. Christians should be wary of joining majorities; they are often wrong. They form the kind of mobs that end up screaming, “Crucify him,” or

“Hang him,” or “Lynch him,” or “He should be shot.” This is a form of verbal bullying that can lead to physical violence. “There are millions of us,” Facebook friend warned me. Another old strategy has made a comeback on the shoulders of old Jim Crow: reification – the treating of persons as objects or things. Under the disguise of opposing “political correctness,” people are now going on and on about “the blacks,” “the Muslims,” “the immigrants,” “the liberals,” “the right-wingers.” Lumping everyone in a group into the same pile is a negative use of language. It’s a way of expressing anger and using slander.

No wonder Paul says “Put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice.” A prominent psychiatrist wrote, “Everyone accuses; everyone defends.” If someone on one side does something wrong, his defenders will say, “They do it too.” Saying that everyone does it is not a comfort. This infantile response is an irrational argument. In early childhood, how many of us, caught red-headed with our hand in the cookie jar, shouted, “She did it first.” Mother never fell for this appeal, but it seems effective in our culture among allegedly grown-up people.

As most of us were told repeatedly by our parents, “Two wrongs don’t make a right.” In this mudhole fight that we call the USA, we are all muddy and no one can claim the absolute high ground.

I really am trying to help here. Grab on to Paul’s insistence that “all things may be lawful, but not all things are beneficial” (I Cor. 6:12). With all our screaming about rights and freedom these days, I think we need a bit of biblical reality. Listen to Paul one more time: “In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—and believers at that.” The idea that we would voluntarily suffer wrong simply is a thought we have trouble comprehending, isn’t it? The idea that we would allow ourselves to be defrauded and offer forgiveness instead of filing suit makes no sense in our world. We have lost the sensibility of “turning the other cheek,” replacing it with “If someone hurts you, hurt them back 5, 10, 15 times as hard.” Can we admit that we would find it hard to comprehend the presumptions that would make such rhetorical questions intelligible?

Look, I am not trying to change the world here. I am suggesting that we are on what I call the rampage escalator. And someone has turned the switch to warp speed. We need to get off the rampage escalator and I have one practical message: Whatever you think, whatever you say, whatever you do, try not to grieve the Holy Spirit. And if you slip, get yourself to a church on Sunday and confess your sin in the following ancient prayer:

Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.