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**Listen to the Teacher – Ephesians**

We don't usually talk much about Lent after the first Sunday or so, at least not in the sermon. But Lent is a time of reflection and self-examination, and since we've already planned to examine forgiveness, we'll keep that discipline going.

This is a wonderful passage from Paul, that doesn't need much setting into context because its message is true in any time.

One thing that often comes around as a topic of discussion at our waypoint on the journey of life is what we *should* have done. And there are many, many variations on that theme out there – but one of the most common is, "I should have listened to..." My parents, of course; but next in popularity is: "my teachers."

How many things did your teachers say – both to you individually and to whole classes – that you wish you'd paid attention to at the time, since they've become abundantly true after you'd blithely ignored them? "Do your homework." "Do it right the *first* time." "Ask questions."

“Learn to do it my way before you go off on your own.” Or my favorite:  
“Read the question carefully, all the way to the end.”

These are just simple things – there are many more profound that you can probably bring to mind. But the important point that underlies these – and the teachings of Jesus and the things of God – is simply this: they are not trying to give us impossible tasks, but to give us better lives.

Well, Paul – Paul the Apostle, that is – is our teacher this morning.

Now is a great time – should we decide to make use of it – that we can use to clean our spiritual house, or as Diane says in her Valley Voice article this month, take inventory. The Good News is that we’ve been set free from sin and death by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But do we honor that sacrifice in our own lives? Is our slate swept clean by God only so we can mess it up again? Are we listening to the teacher? Learning the lessons the first time?

Let’s switch gears for a moment. There is so much death in this world.

Oh, not just the death that comes at the end of life; that comes to all creation. In fact, for Christians, the end of this life is the beginning of new life, as the prayer of Francis of Assisi says so well in its last line: “it is by dying that we are born to eternal life.”

That is one thing. What I'm talking about is the death that invades life. There are so many things that the world offers or throws at us that pull us toward physical death – bad habits, addictions, the Safeway parking lot; but there are even more that deaden us inside, that dry out our spiritual vitality. That sort of death is all around us.

And death has been much in my thoughts lately. Then came Lent. Ash Wednesday was an incredibly busy day around this church, between our regular Ash Wednesday services, a huge memorial service, a meeting of Session, and all the other things that occupy our people and this building.

But it was at The Source that God whispered into my heart what it needed to hear, and what I needed to do this Lent. What it whispered, through Marti Long's inspirational take on the beginning of Lent, was to work at resisting these deadly distractions as they appear.

I made a Lenten resolution this year to give up death. So, anything that has the potential to damage my spiritual health, or which I might do that could damage others', is my target. Now, it isn't be easy; like any good bad things, these deadly little bits of death persistent: more you resist them, the harder they work at you, which only reinforces the need to seek the Teacher's help in fighting them.

Which brings us to this wonderful spiritual laundry list of Paul's. If you would like to join me in giving up death for Lent, or are looking

for something meaningful to give up or set aside for a Lenten discipline, this passage is a great resource – throw one or all of these in the wash: “Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil.”

Anyone out there not bitter about *something*? There sure is plenty of reason to be; but Paul isn't one for allowing exceptions. Put aside that bitterness.

How about losing your temper? There are times when I wonder whether I'll ever find mine again! But, really, are you being touchy? Our tempers are especially tender when we have become focused on ourselves, wrapped up in our personal business. Think about someone else for a change – a very positive one!

Number three: Anger. One of the most beautiful teachings in the spiritual self-work of the Twelve-Step programs (like Alcoholics Anonymous) is the flat statement that “anger is the dubious luxury of normal people.” Anger is a killer for those who aren't solidly based and balanced – it's practiced far too much in the world. And the very worst is righteous anger. There are few things that can do more harm to your soul than righteous anger.

Shouting? How about trying to quiet that inner noisemaker? Many have learned to tame it most of the time, but the discipline of remaining calm is priceless.

Slander – the great gremlin of the church since the beginning. Who can resist the wrong word at the right time? Not to mention number six on the list: “every other evil.”

Given this list, we’ve got plenty to work with. In fact, probably more than any one of us could handle all at once for all of Lent.

Paul the teacher has told us what not to do. Now he shifts to the positive. Here’s the second half of Paul’s list: “Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.”

How can we practice this? How can we keep the Holy Spirit of God happy?

Make a choice. Right now. Choose to carry a different attitude and demeanor from this service, and carry it not just to the door, but out into the parking lot and to wherever you may find yourself. When we gather around this table and celebrate this incredible gift of unity in Christ, think about what a difference adopting these teachings could make in your life – and what difference *that* will make in the lives you touch. Listen to Paul the teacher - now.

It just so happens that the word translated as “kind” is, in Greek, *krestos*. Sound familiar? It did to Paul, which is surely why he used it here: be *krestos* for Christ, compassionate, and forgive as you have been forgiven in Christ.

This is all pretty simple – but so was “do your homework.” So we’ve included a great model for all these things in your bulletin – the prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi:

“Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

“O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

Take that prayer, write it on your heart, and say it several times a day – and you will find yourself following Paul’s teaching, and even more importantly, you will find your spirit growing as the Holy Spirit of God joyfully works its way into your very core. It’s not an impossible task – and it will give you, and those around you, a better life.