



## Pentecost 12 – Proper 14 (B)

### Living Together

[RCL] 1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

*Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.*

There is a reason that the Rule of Saint Benedict is 73 chapters long.<sup>1</sup> The famous rule of life is a compilation of the wisdom Benedict gathered from the early monastic communities of which he was a part, and it became the basis for many religious communities in Europe and around the world. It covers all manner of things: humility, restraint of speech, how to receive guests (with reverence), how to treat those who are ill (with gentleness), how to pray, how to eat, how to work, and so on, until the final chapter which is titled, “This Rule Only a Beginning of Perfection.” The level of detail indicates how difficult it can be to order the common life of a group of disparate people trying to reflect the love of Christ together. It also reminds us that working toward this way of living together is a lifelong project.

Perhaps more familiar to us than Benedict’s Rule are the norms established for common life in classrooms or reflection groups. These boundaries are mutually agreed upon in the hope that all will feel a little safer and more at ease in the group. Making sure conversation is respectful, using “I” statements, waiting to speak a second time until everyone has had a chance to speak—these are steps we take to build communities in which each person can grow and be challenged in helpful ways.

In a world in which one shudders to peruse the comment section of nearly any online article or social media post, it is striking to experience a community of people from different backgrounds and experiences who choose to share a common life with mutual respect and kindness. These kinds of communities testify that there is another way to be together—a way that witnesses to the abundant love and grace of God.

The missive to the Ephesians is packed with instructions on how to live in such a community. Throughout the letter, Paul reminds them to be distinctive by their way of life together: to speak the truth in love, to

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<sup>1</sup> The Rule of Benedict is available in book and online form. The exact version referenced can be found here:

<https://saintjohnsabbey.org/rule>

build one another up, to remember that they are members of one body, each with their own gifts to contribute toward the good of the whole.

Today's passage in particular focuses on how to speak to one another:

Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

In this passage, there is no pretending that anger and frustrations will not arise. Indeed, it is only natural for patience to run out and for grievances to add up. But it is how one responds in those moments, Paul seems to say, that is key. He instructs them to only say "what is useful for building up, as there is need." This is not a glossing over of differences or suppressing of conflict in order to get along. Rather it is about working through conflict with thoughtfulness and generosity of spirit, trusting that doing so will be constructive and lifegiving for the community in the end.

The last lines of today's passage emphasize the witness of this way of living together:

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

We are not often encouraged in this day and age to be kind, tenderhearted, or forgiving; rather, our society seems to value the opposite. Kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness are portrayed by many as weakness, and yet Paul encourages these attributes as a way to imitate no less than God, creator of the universe.

And these attributes do take strength and extra effort. When we are cranky or tired or irritated, it is difficult to watch our words and think through how best to communicate about a conflict. Part of why a community puts norms or a rule of life in place is to provide scaffolding in those moments when we might be tempted to tear one another down rather than build one another up. In those difficult moments, it is easy to say the thoughtless thing, and it takes energy to think through one's words. But though it takes more effort, the return is abundant. A community that builds one another up, communicates clearly and with kindness, and works through conflict patiently and trusting in God's grace is a community that can serve as a beacon of hope. Such a community empowers its members to use their gifts and reflects the glory of God's grace, abundance, and love.

Moreover, none of us needs to rely solely on the love and generosity that we can muster up on our own. The recurring message throughout Ephesians is that Christ is our source. When we run out of patience or kindness or energy for choosing our words carefully, we can dip into the deep well of love we find in God. That is the love and grace that can flow through us and allow us to form communities marked by God's abundance.

Earlier in Ephesians, Paul shares this prayer for the community:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

So, how might this community and other communities of which you are a part reflect the fullness of God? Where are the places that kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, and speaking the truth in love would contribute to the building up of the whole body? If we take seriously that we are "rooted and grounded in love," how does that shape the decisions we make and the words we use?

As we approach the end of the summer and the beginning of a new school and program year, it is a good moment to reflect on the health of our communities and to recommit to practicing ways of being together that will point to the abundant grace and kindness of God. May our prayer be to both see and reflect God more clearly as we embark on this project together. Amen.

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