

Sermons from Park Hill: July 20, 2008

Sermons from Park Hill Congregational UCC Denver, Colorado

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Ephesians 4:24 – 5:2 “Stone by Stone”

Tasuku was a poor stonecutter. His job was to cut blocks of stone from the foot of a mountain. Every day he stood at the bottom of a mountain and worked to chip and cut the hard rock with his little chisel. One day he saw a prince parade by with beautiful, colorful clothes and Tasuku envied the prince. He wished *he* could have that kind of wealth. The Great Spirit heard Tasuku and granted his wish. He became a wealthy prince.

Tasuku enjoyed his silk clothes and was happy with his powerful armies, *until* he saw the sun wilt the flowers in his royal garden. He wished he had the kind of power the sun had, and his wish was granted. He became the sun, with the power to parch fields and humble the people with their thirst.

Tasuku was happy to be the sun, *until* a cloud covered him and blocked his powerful heat. With that, he made another wish, and the Spirit complied. Tasuku became a cloud with the power to cover the sun *and* send powerful rains and floods and storms to destroy whatever he wanted.

Tasuku was happy to be the cloud, *until* he realized the mountain stood solid despite all his storms and floods. So Tasuku demanded to be the mountain. The Spirit obeyed. Tasuku became the mountain and was more powerful than the prince, the sun, or the cloud. And he was happy, *until* he felt a chisel chipping away at his feet. It was a poor stonecutter – cutting blocks from the foot of the mountain to sell for his daily living. What do you suppose he wished to be then?

There is the obvious moral of the story that when we wish to be something we are not, we'll find ourselves eventually wishing to be who we were in the first place...that it's better to accept ourselves as we are and grow from there than to wish to be someone else. We know, of course, that'll just bring us a whole other set of problems. Yet, remember, accept who you are, but aspire to be nothing less than all God has made us, *already* made us, to be.

But I think this story tells us much more. I was taken by the idea of the poor stonecutter in our lives - of something so little, so insignificant, so minor, *yet*, piece by piece, chipping away and

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slowly breaking apart our foundation. Imagine something chipping away at you. Something so little, so unimportant that you ignore the chipping away your body, your mind, soul and strength, your foundation, your base... Health, relationships, balance. Something so small, you barely pay attention to it. Then consider this – it isn't someone else chipping away at our foundation. It's us. When we are not careful, we take ourselves down; when we are not paying attention, we take ourselves down, one stone at a time.

The testing we go through during a major crisis can build us up or tear us apart. We expect to have our faith tested and tried at various times in our lives. Illness, the death of a loved one, losing a job – major life-changing events... But what about those little “somethings,” like those insignificant words that slip so easily from our mouths? *They* tear us down and break us apart. When I consider the words of Paul in Ephesians and imagine the stonecutter, I am challenged to pay attention to my words and deeds and behaviors and habits – things like the little words I throw away without thinking about it, when I'm tired or irritated.

I'll never forget the first time I told someone “I didn't *intend* to hurt you.” But they replied – “it doesn't matter what you *intended* to say, it's the *impact* of what you did say. You may not have intended to say something insensitive, but you did. And it hurt.” I hadn't thought of it that way before – that it doesn't matter that I didn't intend to hurt their feelings, but that the impact

of my words or actions did hurt. Something that seemed so minor, insignificant, that I didn't pay attention to in my rush – things that can build *others* up or tear them down. But, at the same time - what have I done to myself?

God is our rock. Our faith is our foundation. We build our lives on the rock of God's love and our foundation on the teachings of our faith. But a lack of attention to our words and deeds and actions can chip away at us, stone by stone, until the faith that is our foundation has grown weak. What's wrong with a little gossip here, a little sarcasm there? What's the problem with a little impatience here, a little grudge there? What's the tragedy of a little insult here, a little annoyance there? And what's a little stonecutter to a mountain? Well, stone by stone by stone by stone... And it's a rock-slide. Sarcasm by stone by gossip by stone by grudge by stone... (stone by stone) And we slide – right off our foundation, sliding right out of the kind of commitments as Christians that transform our lives. When we put on the garment of Christ, as Paul describes it, we set aside the old life. Dying to bitterness and wrath, we rise to the new life, a different kind of life in Christ marked by kindness and forgiveness. We are made different! Until...stone by stone... What is it that can build us up or tear us down?

It may be the major crisis that *shakes* our faith, but it's the little grudges and resentments that actually *tear down* our foundation...stone by stone. Do you know what I mean? It may not be the big decision that causes an earthquake in our

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lives, but the unexamined habit of saying a little too much about someone else's problem that exposes a stony heart. *Saying* a little too much, but I might add, *listening* a little too eagerly too! Stone by stone...

When we put on the garment of Christ, we are to set aside our old ways. In Christ, we claim an abundant life – but then, like the stonecutter, do we wish we had something else, someone else's life. For you, what are those things – those little, insignificant, seemingly unimportant words or habits or actions - things that chip away at our faith, that try to tear down our foundation when we aren't paying attention? I'm sure you know what it feels like to have someone else try to tear you down. I'm sure you know about the big things that have threatened to take you down. But, what's that little chipping sound? Can you hear it?

We may be ready to blame someone else. We may be tempted to think such things as words don't really matter. Or we may act as though being a Christian doesn't really make a difference – yes, with our words we can proclaim peace and with our actions cut the throats of our enemies. We can easily prove that being a Christian has very little to do with how we live our life. Or the evidence of our kindness and forgiveness might be liberating – for ourselves and others.

Have you ever heard someone say – or maybe you've said – I don't want a religion that tells me

how to live my life. I don't want a religion that tells me how to live my life. There is definitely some truth in that statement for me. When someone tells me I can't worship God if I'm wearing shorts, or that women can't wear pants or make-up, or some other prohibition - what I consider man-made rules - I *am* going to rebel and say what difference does it make!? It is what is in my heart that matters to God, not my outward appearance.

I don't want a religion that tells me how to live my life. But I do want one to change my life – someone to show me how to live a better life. And, following the example, if I am a person of faith, if I claim to be a Christian, won't my thoughts, words, deeds, behaviors be different than if I wasn't a Christian? If it's what's in my heart that matters to God, then what are the words coming out of me? And what's the point of religion if we are no different before or after we begin to follow its practices?

Being a Christian does matter. Being a disciple of Christ puts us on a life-long journey of discovery. And we *will* fall, we will fail to *always* live up to our best intentions. But forgiveness is also the mark of Christ, and an example to practice *not only* on others, but on *ourselves*. As Jesus commanded: Love your neighbor as you love *yourself*. And as Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self...and to be renewed in the spirits of your minds, and to clothe yourself with the new self." (vs. 22-24)

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What is the "Old Life?" Paul characterized it with these words: wrangling, bitterness, wrath, slander, malice. But what do they mean? I had a little fun with some word play and I looked at other words that give more shape to those five words:

OLD LIFE:

Wrangling

Backbiting
Bad-mouthing
Infighting
Power struggle

(Bad-mouthing, infighting and power struggles are part of the old life)

Bitterness

Hostility
Lack of sympathy
Resentment
Hatred
Sourness
Animosity
Loathing
Disgust

(A lack of sympathy and sourness are part of the old life)

Wrath

Rage
Rant and rave
Go on
Talk wildly
Blather
Make Nonsense

Anger
Annoyance
Exasperation
Irritation
Impatience

Frenzy
Passion
Obsession
Whirl

(Blathering and impatience are part of the old life)

Slander

Insult
Smear
Spread
Multiply

(Insulting and multiplying stories are part of the old life)

Malice

Nastiness
Hatred
Cruelty
Grudge
Vindictiveness

(Nastiness and grudges are part of the old life)

NEW LIFE:

We Are Sealed/Marked (by Holy Spirit)

Preserved for the day of redemption

Show Kindness

Thoughtfulness
Attention to detail
Gentleness
Tenderness
Warmth
Affection

Compassion
(Warmth and affection and an attention to the details are part of the new life)

Be Tenderhearted

Be Forgiving (as we are forgiven)

Merciful
Magnanimous
Generous
Big-hearted
Liberal
Open-minded

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Unprejudiced

(Mercy, a big heart and an open mind are part of the new life)

Be Imitators of God (as children who learn)

Not to mimic (to copy in order to make fun of), not to *be* like or *look* like, but to *follow* the example of Jesus.

As Christ Did, Let Us Sacrifice

Let go

Surrender

Lay down your arms (weapons of the OLD LIFE)
(Surrendering all the insults and grudges we hold on to so dearly is a mark of the new life)

Stone by stone we can build upon our foundation.

Little things – that no one notices, no one else knows about - do matter. Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, assures us that what we do matters to God, that God notices even if no body else does. Nobody knows I was tempted to shoplift, but didn't. Nobody knows I was tempted to sleep with my partner's best friend, but didn't. Nobody knows when I want so badly to say a cruel or hurtful word but hold back. But God knows. And I know." And stone by stone we *build* our house upon the rock.