

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

Have you ever met a real, live woman named Jezebel? Probably not. I never have. Even folks who are unfamiliar with the story of Jezebel from the Hebrew scriptures know that's not a name you want your little girl to grow up with! It conveys the unflattering characteristics of impudence and shamelessness, someone who is unethical and immoral. The Jezebel responsible for ruining what was probably at one time a perfectly lovely name was a Phoenician queen who married Ahab, king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. She and her family were worshipers of Baal and other gods, so in marrying her Ahab denied his Jewish faith, a rash and impious act that resulted in evil consequences.

Although Jezebel and Ahab aren't mentioned in today's short passage from First Kings, we should be aware that it's through a power struggle with them that the great prophet Elijah has come to sit under the solitary broom tree. As we learn in First Kings Chapter 18, Elijah had taunted the prophets of Baal to prove to him that their god was real. Despite their best efforts, nothing happened. But when Elijah prayed for the Lord's help to show that God is real, fire fell from heaven and consumed everything. Elijah's threat was made more real when he killed the prophets of Baal. He was declared an enemy of the state, and Jezebel promised to make his life like the lives of the dead prophets.

When we find Elijah today, he sits alone, in despair, inviting God to take his life. It's often not easy to serve God under even the best of circumstances; but in Elijah's day the rules were unclear and there was great risk. That's how things were done under the Old Covenant, long before Jesus came along and told us to love our neighbors as ourselves. What happened between Elijah and Jezebel was very different from the way we're instructed to treat one another, especially when we are together members of the Body of Christ.

That's what the writer is speaking about in today's passage from his letter to the Ephesians. He begins by reminding us to speak the truth to our neighbors. "Be angry," he says, acknowledging that sometimes we do get angry. "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." *That* is how we are to live together in the Body of Christ we call "the Church." If only it were as easy as that sounds! But it is not.

"Church" is a word that comes from two Greek words. The first, *kyriakon*, means "belonging to the Lord." The second, *ekklesia*, means "assembly." Putting them together, we identify the Church as the assembly of those who belong to the Lord. We often refer to this "assembly" as a community, a unified body of people who share common interests or beliefs. In the case of the church, of course, the common interest is our faith; our common belief is in Christ. What sometimes seems to be missing is the unity.

It's not a new problem, unfortunately. In her book, "Imitators of God," Letty Russell writes that "one of the greatest problems in the first century, and in every century since has been how to live up to the calling of Christ to be a community of new humanity, a community of love." Divisions have always been present in the Body of Christ, as the Letter to the Ephesians and Paul's epistles to the early churches remind us.

In the early church, and in orthodox Christian theology, sin is most easily understood as something that alienates the believer from God. Even today that can cover a lot of territory. In Ephesians four, verse eighteen, we learn that the author is speaking directly to church members, specifically

Gentiles, who were darkened in their understanding of the Gospel, separated from a life in God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. We can look more closely at the letter to learn the specifics he was addressing, but our efforts would be better spent looking into the areas of our own sinfulness, areas of our individual and community lives where *we* are ignorant and hard of heart. Sin is not always about immorality. Christ teaches us, over and over again, that we are to love one another and reminds us that in our love for one another, we also love him. Or not. We don't remember that often enough.

Right off the bat, these words from the Letter to the Ephesians make us nervous. Speak truth to our neighbors? How many of us are willing to do that, and when willing, are able to do so with kindness and sincerity, with a desire to build up rather than tear down? Speaking truth involves a lot of risk, because it contradicts what we've been taught over and over again: if it's not our business, we shouldn't get involved. Perhaps we need to stop and look at this the way the writer intended it: we are to speak truth to one another because we are all part of one another. What one of us does affects the rest of us. If we don't speak truth to one another, we're not being truthful with ourselves. The same is true if we are unwilling to allow others to speak truth to us. We cannot be a genuine Christian community without truth.

What about anger? We somehow believe that if we let ourselves be angry, we're not acting as Christians. Stop. There were times when Jesus was angry. It's not the anger that's bad, it's our response, our reaction to our own anger and the anger of others that we must be careful of. There are times when anger is justified, but even then it gives us no right to inflict hurt on another person. It doesn't mean we can tell someone off or badmouth them to everyone else we know. And that's what happens far too often. Anger, just like other emotions, can cause our perceptions to be skewed and our intentions to be distorted. Anger makes us vulnerable to dangerous behavior that can lead to our own regrets. When we're angry, we risk losing control. Anger is a signal for us to stop and to pray. What's the basis for our anger? Is it misdirected? Are we blaming someone who may not deserve to be blamed? What will be the outcome of our anger and the way we choose to express it?

Perhaps that's what the author of this letter meant when he wrote that we should "let no evil come out of our mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that (y)our words may give grace to those who hear." Well. It's kind of hard to imagine speaking truth to our neighbors or using anger in a way that builds up, that offers grace to someone else, isn't it? It's easy to imagine the opposite, though, because we've seen what happens. Negativity breeds negativity. One person's grumbling or complaining about someone or some thing can quickly turn to two people complaining, then four people, then so on. Before we know it, everybody's mad and significant damage has been done.

Yet the same chain reaction can occur when we use our words and emotions in a positive way. We just have to think first, to evaluate our own position, our own feelings, and our own reactions, and then to pray for guidance. We have to be sure that when we speak truth, when we acknowledge our anger, we don't do it for our own gratification or justification; that we do it for the building up of the Body of Christ, in sincerity, out of love and kindness and forgiveness. That's what living in grace is about.

"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." *Amen, and amen.*