

## ***The Ties That Bind Us***

**Ephesians 4:25-5:2**

Last Sunday, Wendy and I returned home from a seductively restful week of vacation in Vermont. What made it so special is that we did very little other than walk the dogs on rural dirt roads and mountain trails, play a little golf, visit some charming towns, buy vegetables and cheese from farmers' markets, and watch the moon and stars emerge from the dusk to paint the night sky with celestial light.

One of the week's unexpected pleasures was getting to spend many of the evenings with the couple who hosted us at the small Bed and Breakfast for our week away. Glenn and Kay were remarkably accommodating and gracious to us to the degree we often felt as if we had discovered the haven of angels whenever they come to earth! On more than one evening, we spent hours from the late afternoon to near midnight relaxing in Adirondack chairs overlooking the mountain landscape, chatting with Kay and Glenn, and sharing food and conversation as if we were old friends catching up on the longstanding ties that bind us. Wendy and I valued the setting and experience so much that by Friday, we went ahead and booked our stay for next summer!

On the way home, I realized the bond of friendship which developed between our two households was a bit of an anomaly. What I mean is, we might not have become fast friends had we mutually made our judgments about each other based on the typical way in which people relate, namely, through the multiple things they share in common. That includes not only hobbies and interests, but

shared views and values, along with commonalities in faith, politics, backgrounds, and beliefs.

I got a hint of this at first when we settled ourselves into the barn apartment and I noted, as I often do, what was shelved in the bookcase. Along with Vermont visitor guides and pamphlets extolling the marvels of the surrounding area, there were titles that immediately set off alarm bells inside my head. Several of them were authored by Christian fundamentalist preachers—most of which had to do with the End Times. Others led with topics that would make Fox News blush with embarrassment over such political and social extremism. I couldn't imagine who might be the source of this hogwash. I could only assume some previous tenant had left them in an effort to proselytize the unsuspecting. With a concern for protecting their reputation, I thought of reporting this to Glenn to save him the humiliation of having such tripe offend future clientele. I, of course, being the politically correct man that I am, would consider it my moral duty to weed out such offensive drivel to ensure that our hosts would be warmly remembered by all their guests.

Somehow this duty slipped my mind through several of our morning breakfasts, mainly because with them serving us so elegantly and generously, our conversations were such that I actually believed that he and I shared the same views, even when I mounted my soap box and rendered an opinion or two about climate change, government policies, and dissecting the sorry state of the Red Sox. The latter, of course, was playing up to our hosts since Kay is a passionate fan of the Yankees (who, apparently, are doing better than Boston this year). Despite that, a good-spirited friendly rivalry

complemented what appeared to be several things we held in common.

However, around midweek, there was a surprising twist. It began when Glenn offered a few laudatory sentiments about a group of fundamentalist Baptists from Mississippi whom they had hosted not too long ago, who were on a mission trip to save wayward Vermonters. Then he went on to express his deep concern about the state of the world, the economy, and politics in general, how he had taken all of his money out of the stock market because the world was headed toward disaster, if not its end, and how he believed Christ was going to return any time now. About that time, I recall sitting there somewhat befuddled and a little relieved that I hadn't brought up my concerns about the contents of his library, realizing that he was likely the source of the material in question, and people like me his intended target. For a moment, it seemed as if the scales had dropped from my eyes and I was viewing a different man than I had known up to this point (and that vacation was about to be spelled, T-O-R-M-E-N-T!). I wasn't quite sure how to proceed. I realized, I could have taken umbrage over his opinions and challenged him with a preacher's fury or, I suppose, I could have taken a quick detour down the path of polite avoidance.

But then, this was my vacation and since I was in Vermont, I wanted to take the road less traveled. So, instead of initiating a heated debate, Glenn and I conducted a fascinating, and very civil, conversation between a bleeding-heart liberal and a conscientious conservative over religion and politics, where we listened to one another, responding thoughtfully to each others' beliefs, arguments,

and perspectives. Granted, my primary motive may have been to not bite the hand of the one literally feeding me, still I behaved myself, as he did in return. By the end of the night, and certainly by our departure on Saturday, we realized that our points of view really didn't matter much because our common ground was based on being considerate and generous with each other, which created enough trust and meaningful ties that would bind us as friends going forward.

I have to admit, this was a teachable moment for me, insofar as I'm not as tolerant of opposing views as I think I am. I often find myself stumbling on the higher road and privately prejudging people, categorizing them, and working off stereotypes that predetermine my expectations and openness to them or them to me. I know this is characteristic of tribal behavior (whatever tribe we choose to identify with, of course), where the proverbial "birds of a feather flock together," while those outside of the "flock" are viewed as predator or prey—threats or targets, easy to stereotype and shortchange.

As Wendy correctly reminds me, I don't always give people a chance—or at least enough of a chance to foster my empathy or trust in them. I incorrectly assume I've got them all figured out in my incomplete caricature, taking my cues from biases inherent to the environments I inhabit and ideologies I lean toward, allowing certain hot-button issues to trigger this defensive reaction and preventing me from being fair and open to those who view things differently than I. And, I suppose, I'm not unique; I'm like a lot of people who are deeply concerned about certain matters of life. We tend not to cultivate good and easy relations with those who oppose our views or who are different than we are.

This, of course, contributes to the incivility so common to our world, where namecallers and partisan bullies get so much of the public stage. But even on a private level, whenever there is conflict, when two or more see things differently, people often forget that trust is ultimately more important than being in agreement, because trust allows people to disagree with a measure of civility. That's what I found with Glenn. Trust allows for disagreements that are debatable, but not personal—thought-provoking, but not antagonistic. In some ways, we've lost the classic art of debate and disagreement, for now rivals typically feel threatened and attacked, instead of merely challenged. Rather than respectful engagement with a sense of being bound together with a shared objective to care for each other's welfare in a common world, adversarial people exploit and magnify their differences in order to demonize, if not eliminate, their opponent, which only undermines trust and security, if it ever existed between them. As a consequence, relationships are broken for no better reason than the fact that stubborn pride and personal egos have taken up all the available space for the nuances of reconciling differing views.

Building trust requires us to go beyond superficialities of agreement in order to bind our lives with others in a way that will withstand conflict. Trust is fostered by honesty and humility, when people are forthright and candid, but also considerate by not trying to stick it to their opponent. Trust requires some effort to cultivate it.

Natural trust, of course, is based more on common interests and shared values, which works because we tend to see ourselves in the other person (i.e., our tribal identity); thus, a bond of trust is

formed, even in a first impression or acquaintance. We trust them because they seem to be like us—we have some basic points of identity in common. However, if differences arise or if there is a question about another’s true intentions, that’s where intentionality comes into play.

Intentionality means looking for reasons to trust another person and taking steps to strengthen it. How we act to cultivate trust is largely based on what we choose to see. Paul Wadell, in his book, *Becoming Friends*, observed:

...[I]f our vision [of others] is not reverent and truthful, our behavior will not be just. We will not see the bond we share with every human being as a child of God and the responsibilities that flow from that bond. If we look at the world through a vision skewed by self-serving fantasies—through a lens of self-centeredness and arrogance—our behavior is bound to do harm because...we see everything in terms of our own needs and preferences. Our actions will lack compassion, kindness, justice, and love because we will not see the image of God in others, much less the inherent goodness and beauty in all of life. Or if we gaze upon the world through the eyes of anger and resentment, or through a vision twisted by cynicism, our behavior will likely be thoughtless and rough, destined more to hurt than to bless. That will be the case not because we intentionally wish to do harm but because we lack the moral vision requisite for goodness...

Every act of cruelty, every expression of injustice, every demeaning joke, and every prejudicial thought, attitude, word, or action is rooted in a failure of vision, an inability or refusal to see the God-given dignity and goodness of another human being. Without truthful and reverent vision, we will not see the sacredness and beauty of every man and woman as a child of God destined for friendship with God. <sup>1</sup>

In a word, we cultivate trust by reframing our perception of the other person into someone we want to trust—to see them as a child of God—as warranting our respect, consideration, and empathy—even if, at the time, that vision appears clouded, distorted, or conflicted.

Building ties that bind us in trust takes effort. That’s one of the things that I appreciate about our text from Ephesians—the writer

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Wadell, *Becoming Friends*, Brazos, 2002, pp.122-23.

(assumed to be the Apostle Paul) was quite practical and explicit in explaining how, in his setting in Ephesus, that needed to be done. It comes across proverbial enough to apply in just about any setting, though it was addressed to a young church struggling to live into their faith commitments and into their love for each other. Fundamentally, Paul wanted them to find a way to trust each other, even though the individual and cultural differences between them often brought problems and obstacles to overcome. Honestly, I don't think this text requires much explanation, just a willingness to consider what it says and then follow through with it in effective ways.

So, looking at the text, how does one build trust and respect into a relationship? By being considerate of the other, listening to what they say and engaging them in a friendly, thoughtful way, in service to them and to the common interests and good you share. Eugene Petersen in *The Message* offers a fresh take on this passage with his translation:

What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all. When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself. Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life. ...Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift. Keep company with God and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious, but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.

What a helpful guide to getting along in all types of relationships—marriages, parent/child and sibling relationships, friendships, business partnerships, social acquaintances, and the like. That's not only useful instruction for how to reframe our perceptions of others,

but the effect is to build trust in relationships, even when huge disagreements are present. We sacrifice our egos and insistence on being right, or on winning an argument, by yielding to the greater purpose of building trust and respect in a relationship. Selflessness and service are what strengthen these ties.

The ties that bind us to others are more significant than are the opinions we render, or the emotions we harbor—all of which are subject to change over time, or can be shaped by others, especially when we are less defensive and more responsive to fostering a friendship that means something. Building trust helps to keep disagreements civil.

It's interesting to me that in John's Gospel, one of the last messages Jesus had for his disciples was to call them "friends." What a fascinating choice of terms for one whose theological and spiritual legacy would ultimately become a source of great disagreement and conflict throughout the ages. What that says to me is, in heaven's view, friendship is a sacred model of relationship that can withstand conflict because there is a desire and intentionality toward trust. Friends care about each other; they offset any difficulty with ample experiences of laughter, sharing, and mutual sacrifice. True friends seek to mend fences and deepen their mutual love. True friendship is deep and sustaining. Friendship may well be the most sacred tie that binds us to God and to one another.

Ultimately, regardless of what we believe or how we perceive the world, the best expression of our faith, hope, and love is in how we cultivate trust and friendship, not only with those who are like us, but particularly with those who are not. For such are the ties that

bind us to all of God's children, friend and foe alike, which is as ancient and as sacred and as meaningful as life itself.

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9 August 2015