

In this part of his Letter to the house church in Ephesus, Paul lists new behaviors to act out, for those of us who are baptized into Christ. He names some old behaviors to leave behind, such as lying and stealing, bitterness and hatefulness – says “leave those behind.” He names new behaviors, says “this is the way we are to talk and act, now that we follow the Lord Jesus.”

He’s giving them, and giving us, guidance on how Christians behave and talk.

Me? I grew up un-churched. My parents were believers, but we moved some, and by the time I came along, our family wasn’t active in a local church. My friends didn’t go to church either. We didn’t know what we were missing. Some of you grew up like that.

Sure, we learned how to act and talk from our parents. At home, with my brothers and sister, I learned the boundaries: Say please and thank you, Arthur. Don’t hit. No cussing. Do your chores. Be home by dark. Do your school homework. That’s how we were to talk and act.

Thinking back, I picked up a couple more “virtues” from the culture of the 1950s as a child. Do you know this one?

“If you can’t say something nice, don’t _____” Sure. “Don’t say anything at all.” Where did we learn that one? I learned it at the movies. Who taught it? Thumper. The rabbit in the movie, “Bambi.” Taught millions of us kids, to curb our tongue, don’t speak mean talk to others. I don’t recall my parents teaching me that. Thumper taught me that.

Another virtue I learned from beyond my family: Stop bad guys and help underdogs. I learned that from the comics I bought each week with part of my allowance. Stop bad guys and help protect underdogs. Superman and Wonderwoman and Batman taught me that. They put on their special clothing, their virtuous costumes, and went out to do good, to stop evil people, to protect the poor and the weak, to help the underdogs.

I’ve remembered those comics lately as I’m chewing on this part of Paul’s letter and I wonder: did the writers of Marvel comics in the 50s read Ephesians, as they created these heroic characters to be models of virtuous behavior for the youth of America?

Apparently they did ! Did you hear Paul writing about putting on special clothing to be virtuous followers of the Lord Jesus Christ? You might have missed it. He didn’t say “be a super hero, be a power ranger, be a transformer” no. But Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus, and to all us Christians ever since, saying:

All of us, both Jews and non-Jews who follow Jesus from now on, in whatever nation: we are to turn our back on the old ways of lying and stealing and vicious talk and violent behavior, leave

that behind, and put on New Behavior and Talk, like putting on new clothing (verse 24 “clothe yourselves with The New Self, created according to the likeness of God ...”). “Clothe yourselves” He says. “Clothe ourselves.”

Wow. What a Fantastic Costume Paul says we’re to put on. Not a cape and tights, no. Being Christian in the world doesn’t look like living in the comics, no, not that. Our costume is Invisible to others. At first.

But then, others begin to notice we must have on some Invisible Costume, because we’re acting differently than others around us. Differently than the dog-eat-dog, everyone-for-themselves, look-out-for-Number-One, anything-goes Mentality that surrounds us, in the general culture, where we go to school, where we go to work, when we turn on TV.

Paul sets out How to Talk and Act for our New Life in Christ. Virtues to act out, to practice, for our own benefit and the benefit of others. Leave behind that old mean talk and walk.

Why? Because Paul’s an uptight, grumpy old man? No. no. Because we’re all in the same community, now that we’re in Christ. Not just with Christians. In community with everyone.

Notice: Paul’s not talking about Being Nice. This is not about niceness. He doesn’t give a fig for being liked by others. Paul’s guidance in Ephesians is not the source of Thumper’s advice to children about only saying “nice” things. No. We’re not talking about “being nice” today.

“Paul knows that when real people live in real community with one another, they will discover real differences, and suffer real discord. This is true whether the community is a marriage, a family, a neighborhood, a church, or a whole society. It is not possible to love one another, without also [getting angry with] one another from time to time.” *

When we get angry, we’re not to shut up and go away, no. That’s what Thumper says, but it’s not deeply satisfying for life in community with others. We’re to speak the truth in love, “forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you,” Paul says.

We read this section of guidance from Paul with gratitude. It sounds like parental advice. OK. It’s also a couple of lists - Old Behaviors to leave behind, New Behaviors to put on like an invisible costume. Speak the truth. Don’t let the sun go down on your anger. Quit stealing. Earn a living and share with the needy. No more bitterness and malice. Practice forgiveness.

OK. So Paul’s a List Guy. Some people are List People. Copy and post lists beside their desk. Helps the Memory. I’m a List Guy when I go to the grocery store.

But – me? - Lists don’t Inspire me, Lists don’t carry, for me, the Power to change my behavior.

And that's what Paul's writing about here. Changed behavior. So. Got any examples, Paul? Any stories, to go along with this List, that'll help inspire me to change how I act and talk?

Stories. Give me a short, well-told story, and I'm there, I'm with you. I'm changed into my Special Invisible Costume, ready to Do Good, to Control Evil, to Protect the Underdogs!

Paul's not a storyteller. I've learned not to expect him to be. Not his strength. So where do Christians like me, who need an example or a story to inspire us, where do we go? Gospels.

Paul writes we are to be Imitators of God, in our talk and behavior. What are the gospel stories that show us how God behaves, so we can Imitate that behavior? We go to the stories about Jesus of Nazareth, himself. And we go to the stories that Jesus told about God: Parables.

Jesus? Rabbi Jesus dressed like everyone else, apparently. But, somehow, others could tell he was different, by what he said, by how he acted. Almost. Almost as if Jesus had on some Invisible New Clothing that Paul talks about. Well, you know the stories. What did he do?

He didn't overlook evil, didn't walk away from bad guys, or lie about what he saw going on. Jesus told the truth when something bad was going on. Example.

We remember that, one day, Jesus saw an angry mob in the village square. Doesn't leave, no. Jesus steps out in front of the mob and says "You all wanna kill this person by throwing rocks at her? Kill her because you hear she's done something wrong? OK. Here. Here's a rock. Step right up here, whoever here who's never done anything wrong. You're the one we need, to throw this first rock. Come on. Step up. Come on. We're waiting ... "

He told the truth in the face of the evil that was coming out of the mob. And what happened? The truth he told, Redeemed a life on the edge, and Healed a community filled with hate and ready to kill. What he said and did helped their anger to cool, before the sun went down. ["Don't let the sun go down on your anger"]

Wow. I'd love to do stuff like that! Stop evil. Protect the underdog. Where can I get MY Invisible Clothing and do that kind of courageous stuff?! Sign me up !

Oh. Right. I'm Baptized. I'm already signed up to do that kind of courageous stuff. You too.

Gospel Stories of what Jesus said and did. They hold power to inspire us, to want to imitate Jesus, and in that way, even imitate God, as we express Divine Love for each and every one: the angry mob and the fearful accused one, the bully and the bruised, the rich and the poor.

Rabbi Jesus not only acted out, the love of God. Rabbi Jesus told stories that can get ahold of us, turn us around. Parables. Some seem easy. Some are really weird, we gotta admit.

Jesus told about God being like a farmer. We gotta admit this is a Weird Farmer. Farmer goes out into his field one morning to plant his crop, broadcast his valuable seed. OK.

The weird part is: this farmer not only casts seed on the good ground (like a sensible farmer would do) BUT also casts seed on rocks, and into the brambles, and on the hard-packed foot-paths, and EVERYwhere. That's weird. That's wasteful. No sensible farmer would do THAT!

But Jesus isn't a Clemson Extension agent, teaching the latest farming practices, is he? No. No.

Jesus is NOT telling a story about farming. He's telling this as a story about the kind of God he's experienced in Scripture, the God who loves him like a parent loves a child, the God who loves everyone, everyone, everyone. Showers love on us, always, like endless seed.

God has that endless supply of love for us. Divine Love. Everywhere, for Everyone. Everyone. Weird. God is like THAT? We'll have to chew on that one for awhile. Is that good news? That God isn't careful about where, about who, receives such showers of Divine Love?

While we chew on that a while, we might remember that we're not always "good ground," ourselves, you and me, are we? Tell the truth, sometimes we're hard hearted as rocks. We can be as troubled and bitter as a bramble patch. We've been, at times, as hard headed as a beaten down footpath. And yet. Yet. God loves us still. Like a weird, senseless, Farmer.

Wow. If only I could tell stories like that! Surprise people with the truth that God loves them in all seasons of their lives. When they're soft and fertile, and when they're hard as rocks. God loves them. Every. Single. Day.

At the time, other rabbis told parables, sure, but this Jesus of Nazareth? Weird. Wonderful. Mysterious. They didn't say "What's this guy been smoking?" No. No.

But they MIGHT have said: "Squint up your eyes and look at him. Does it look like he's wearing some kind of New Invisible Clothes? He talks and acts so differently than other people."

You know what I say? I say "Where can I get MY Invisible Clothing and tell those kinds of mysterious and inspiring stories?! Sign me up!"

Oh. Right. We've already got that invisible costume on today. You and me. Almost forgot. Every day. Those stories are ready for us to tell, and retell, and retell. Not to children. These aren't children's stories. Most of them don't make sense to children. They don't make sense to adults! Because they're weird. They're filled with Mystery. The Mystery of Divine talk. Divine behavior. And you and I are Baptized to talk and behave like that. Can you believe it?

We're ALL costumed to step up,

to claim the courage we've been granted in our Baptism,

to step up boldly,

to stop evil stuff,

to protect and help the underdogs,

to act and talk like Jesus.

Can you believe it ?

Can you believe it ?

August 9, 2009

Rev Arthur S. Gatewood
Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church