

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

GOT ROOM?

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Eric W. Evers

25 So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. 26 Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and do not make room for the devil. 28 Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. 29 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. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. 31 Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, 32 and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. 1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, 2 and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

DIAGNOSIS: Too Much Room for the Devil!

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *No Room for Each Other*

Kind? Tenderhearted? No falsehood? Dealing with anger directly

and immediately, without sin? Doesn't sound like any group of people I know (church or not); at least not if you hang around with them long enough. Bitterness? Check. (Just ask the folks who still stew over the change the last pastor made in the communion procedure!) Stealing? Well, how do you define theft? Malice? Yup, although we usually do a good job of hiding it. Ultimately, in our privacy-obsessed, individualistic, narcissistic culture, we do not live as though we are members of one another. When it's all about "me," then there is no room made for the neighbor.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Room for the Devil

But when we refuse to make room for the neighbor, whether they are a sister or brother in Christ or not, we are squeezing out Christ and making plenty of room for the devil. When we build walls of false speech and bitterness that keep others at a distance (certainly not as "members" of ourselves), we clear all sorts of space for the devil to do his dirty work. And as he stinks up the place, our hearts become hard. We don't have grace for each other (another way of saying we don't make space for each other, perhaps!), and so we wrinkle our noses at each other's faults while ignoring our own.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Grief All Around

Such a state of affairs grieves the Holy Spirit. And that leads to eternal grief for us. If God is grieved and leaves us to our own devices, then the wrath we bear for each other will only be the faintest hint of the wrath to come from God. We have willingly made room for the devil, and when God cleans house, we will be washed out and away ourselves. The strife in our communities is a foretaste and a sign of God's contention against our contentiousness.

PROGNOSIS: Christ Makes a New Space

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal solution) – *Forgiven by a Fragrant Offering*

Fortunately, God contends with our self-absorbed narcissism in more ways than just wrath, and the cleaning of our dirtied house is not simply in the punitive future. God cleaned house on the cross of Christ, who is a fragrant offering that takes away sin. Jesus' death and resurrection clears new space for grace. God makes room; the space we have refused to make for others is cleared for us at the banquet of heavenly mercy and forgiveness. God cleans house by cleansing away our sins.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Imitators of God*

And all of a sudden, it's not about "me" anymore. Since God has already done that in Christ by claiming me and all of my spaces, I don't need to stake out a claim on my own space. We are free, then, to be imitators of God, who has generously made room for us. All the energy that once went into defending our own turf can now be spent on welcoming Christ and, consequently, others.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Making Space for Each Other*

We can make room for others, creating the space of love in our hearts and communities for neighbors both known and new. We make such space through speaking the truth, sharing with the needy, and building up others by our speech. We are members of one another; in other words, our room is room for our neighbors. Such a grace-full orientation is magnetic; it attracts others longing for space of their own. In a yeast-and-dough, seed-to-mustard-tree kind of way, it builds community that grows not my magic or technique, but by the generous working of God's merciful Holy Spirit.