

Pentecost X/Proper 14  
The Ethics of Christian Life

When Boston Red Sox player Wade Boggs played third base at Yankee Stadium, one of the Yankee fans made it a personal mission to harass him. The man had a box seat close to the field and would torment Boggs with obscenities and insults for the duration of every game. Finally, Boggs decided he'd had enough.

As the man began his typical insult routine at the next game, Boggs walked directly over to the man, who was sitting with a group of friends.

"Are you the guy who's always yelling at me?" Boggs asked.

"Yeah, it's me. Whatcha gonna do about it?" responded the man belligerently.

Wade took a new baseball out of his pocket, autographed it, tossed it to the man, and went back to the field to continue his pre-game routine.

The man became one of Wade's biggest fans at Yankee Stadium.

In the letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul gives to the church all it needs to know how to live a life worthy of our Lord Jesus Christ. Such sections of scripture teach us ethics. Ethics means "Theory of living." Ethics is one of the five major branches of philosophy, which attempts to distinguish that which is right from that which is wrong. Ethics differs from morality. Morality allows more leeway for individual interpretation whereas ethics tend to be more universal.

Ethics in plain words means studying and analyzing right from wrong - good from bad.

We don't have to reinvent that wheel. But I think our wheels need some air because they tend to get low and even go flat.

We run our lives on the wheels of *ambition*, *arrogance*, *acidic talk* and *acrimony*, which clunk and bang along and disrupt fraternity and fellowship, while the smooth-rolling tires of *charity*, *compassion*, *clemency* and *commitment*, remain in the trunk.

Those are the wheels we need to mount. Consider them separately:

**Charity:** Here in Ephesians, Paul speaks of sharing with the needy, and of course that is a form of charity that community should include, but the older meaning of charity applies as well. Charity, in its earlier sense, means the willingness to judge people in a tolerant or favorable way. Charity does not require feeling affection toward the other person. But it does require us to act

charitably. It is an attitude treating others as we want to be treated. This form of charity is very personal. Additionally, Paul also talks about alleviating evil talk and being kind. Gossip is malicious and is as slippery as soap.

Examples: How can we show charity to one another? Can you think of old ways, new ways to show charity to someone you don't know very well? When someone you have seen in church has dropped out do you call them? Or do you wait for someone else to do it because you might disturb their privacy?

**Compassion:** Though usually considered a feeling, compassion is really a way of *seeing*. It implies empathy that allows us to *envision* ourselves in the place of another person. That brings awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve that suffering. Paul was talking about compassion when he called for tenderheartedness.

To be tenderhearted, to have compassion, requires us to see ourselves in the position of another, as the following illustrates:

There's an old story of the Hasidic rabbi, Levi Yitzhak, who was once sitting in a Polish tavern. There he saw two peasants at a table.

Both were gloriously in their cups. Arms around each other, they were protesting how much each loved the other.

Suddenly Ivan said to Peter: "Peter, tell me, what hurts me?"

Bleary-eyed, Peter looked at Ivan: "How do I know what hurts you?"

Ivan's answer was swift: "If you don't know what hurts me, how can you say you love me?"

**Clemency/ Mercy:** Paul alluded to clemency or mercy when he urged "forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." That we have something to forgive implies that we need to show clemency. Indeed, community simply does not work without mercy.

According to an old legend, God himself discovered that by trial and error. As the story goes, when God decided to create the world, God first planned to have Justice to rule it. So God said to Justice, "Go and rule this earth which I am about to create."

But, it just didn't work out. The legend says that God tried, seven times, to create a world ruled effectively by Justice, but each attempt was a failure that had to be discarded.

On the eighth attempt, God tried something different; he called in Mercy and said to Mercy, "Go, and together with Justice, rule the world that I am about to create, because a world ruled only by Justice cannot work." And behold, this

creation was good.

It's only a legend of course, but like the best legends, it embodies a significant truth. Without mercy, we have a world that makes no more sense than a world in which children have their hands cut off for stealing bread. So we, too, for the good of all the communities and tribes of which we are a part, need to have the wheel of clemency on our vehicle of life.

**Commitment.** This is surrender of ourselves upward to Christ. As Paul put it here in Ephesians, "Be imitators of Christ ... live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." Commitment is the decision to follow Jesus, but like most promises, it does not do well as a once-for-all-time pledge. Commitment, like the other tires on the vehicle of our life, needs to be reinflated from time to time. Commitment needs the renewal of fresh prayer, new immersion in Scripture, faithful attendance at worship, the ongoing fellowship of kindred minds and the continued experience of sacrificial giving and service.

There's no need to reinvent the wheels of life over again. Paul described them 2,000 years ago, and nobody has been able to improve upon them since. Perhaps in our congregation, we are a bit low on air, but that's a solvable problem.

The wheels are fine.

People of Trinity - Don't let them go flat.