

“Practical Ways to Love a Neighbor in a Twitter World”
 Proper 14B (August 12, 2018)
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put *our* hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen<<

Twitter stood alone this week in the social media world. Several other major social media platforms - Apple, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, Spotify - decided to ban from their sites the conspiracy theories of Alex Jones. (Jones is notorious for claiming that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was faked.) Twitter, and its founder, Jack Dorsey, decided not to ban Alex Jones, because, Dorsey wrote in a tweet, Jones hadn’t broken any of Twitter’s rules, and, in any case, he went on, Twitter polices hate-speech - with a few exceptions¹ - but not *everything* on the platform used by 335 million people. It’s the job of journalists, he argued, to vet facts. This explanation unleashed a torrent of outrage in Twitter-ville, and even in major newspapers. Kara Swisher of *The New York Times* wrote in an op-ed this week that if Twitter “won’t ban ... Alex Jones because he ‘hasn’t violated [its] rules.’ Then what’s the point of these rules?”² Twitter, she wrote, needs “a firm[er] set of values.”

I’m an avid Twitter-user, and can testify that there is a lot of garbage on the platform, but also good stuff too. In fact, all of the content in this sermon about Jack Dorsey and Alex Jones comes from me following links on my Twitter feed. But more than just providing sermon content, Twitter is often the first place to find breaking news, like Friday’s story about the airport employee in Seattle who stole an Alaska Airlines plane. That story was on Twitter before it was on TV. Or the tweet that made news this week from Tesla CEO Elon Musk, who tweeted a “good morning” to his many followers, and then said he was thinking of taking Tesla private, that is, taking it away from shareholders. That story was on Twitter before it was in *The Wall Street Journal*. Twitter can also make you laugh out loud. There’s a parody account that blends pop culture with philosophy called “Kim Kierkegaardashian.” And another account called “Dad’s puns” with a steady stream of corny jokes that can brighten anyone’s day. Like this one: “Why do you never see elephants hiding in trees,” asked Dad’s Puns yesterday morning? “Because they’re so good at it.” Here’s another doozy from Dad’s Puns on Friday: a dad asks his son “What are the lion and witch doing in your wardrobe?” To which the son replies, “It’s Narnia business.” Corny, yes, but able to brighten your mood. Plus Twitter is filled with interesting, somewhat useless information. It will tell you what the CEO of Marriott - a man who travels 200 days a year - does when he first enters a new hotel room: he opens the blinds to get natural light, which he says, helps with jet lag. And you find out what MIT professor Jeremy England says is the meaning of life - according to him, it’s the second law of thermodynamics. And Twitter invites you to entertain intriguing theories, such as, for example, whether the magical Mary Poppins ever attended Hogwarts.

Yes, Twitter can be a positive experience. But it has a terrible darkside, harboring the Alex Joneses, and the white supremacists, and some of the nastiest, poisonous things people can say to one another. Twitter, says one journalist, can be a “cesspool,” “the last big refuge of the repugnant.” Journalists are among Twitter’s most devoted users, and they’re also

¹ President Donald Trump’s tweets frequently break Twitter’s rules about abusive content, but his account is immune because, as President, Trump is considered to be a newsmaker.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/08/opinion/twitter-alex-jones-jack-dorsey.html>

frequently the targets of the most threatening, hate-filled comments, especially in our “fake news” era. Back in July, White House correspondent Maggie Haberman wrote that she needed to pull back from Twitter.³ “I woke up [one] Sunday morning,” she wrote, “feeling anxiety in my chest as I checked the Twitter app on my phone There was a comment I started to engage with - I opened a new post, tapped out some words, then thought better of it and deleted the tweet. The same thing happened repeatedly for the next two hours. The evening before, I had complained to a close friend that I hated being on Twitter. It was distorting discourse, I said. I couldn’t turn off the noise. [My friend] asked [me] what was the worst that could happen if I stepped away from it. There was nothing I could think of. And so . . . I did. After nearly nine years and 187,000 tweets,” wrote Haberman, “I have used Twitter enough to know that it no longer works well for me.” “The viciousness, toxic partisan anger, intellectual dishonesty, motive-questioning and sexism are at all-time highs, with no end in sight,” she continued. “Twitter is now an anger video game for many users. It is the only platform on which people feel free to say things they’d never say to someone’s face.”

Yes, Twitter is light and dark, good and evil, blended - the best and worst of humanity on a single platform - what C.S. Lewis calls in his book *The Screwtape Letters*, “benevolence” and “malice” mingled inside every human soul.⁴ Maybe the writer of today’s New Testament reading from Ephesians was aware of this conflict in the human soul when he (or she) advised readers to speak truth, to not let anger become hate, to be productive with the hands instead of stealing, to guard one’s speech, to not harbor grievances, to be kind and forgiving and tender, and to always walk in love, following the example of Christ. Maybe Twitter should consider replacing its rules for use with this set of values from Ephesians.⁵

This letter to Christians in the ancient city of Ephesus is like a field guide that maps out ways to live well - to, as the writer says, “imitate God.” Throughout this letter, the writer uses family imagery to say we are all adopted by God as children; the writer says we have a glorious inheritance - that God has made irrevocable, eternal promises to us; that God has loved us with a “great love”; and that because of all of this, we are equipped to do good works, to raise healthy families, to live in healthy marriages, and to view every human being as part of a great tapestry - a great family - that God has woven together. The writer reminds us of the privilege it is to pray, of the privilege it is to have hope, of the privilege it is to live in light, of the privilege it is to worship, of the privilege it is to share in community. Ephesians is one of scriptures most uplifting books; it’s the architectural plans for the good life, a roadmap, a field guide, a letter filled with principles and values meant to build faith and build community and build healthy families.

Ephesians is a beautiful text - an incredible work of art. But there’s some debate about who penned this letter. It’s attributed to St. Paul, but the language, syntax, and even the theology are different from letters we know Paul wrote - like Galatians or First Corinthians. A huge section of Ephesians ch. 1 is one, long, run-on sentence in Greek, which is not how St. Paul typically wrote. Ephesians may have been written by a disciple of Paul’s, using “Paul” as a pen name. In the ancient world, using the name of one’s teacher when writing was considered an honor; and mimicking your teacher’s style with some modifications was a way to showcase your learning. Many early Christians used “Paul” as a pen name. There’s a

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/20/sunday-review/maggie-haberman-twitter-donald-trump.html>

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996 [1961]), 35.

⁵ Here’s Twitter’s rules for use: <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules>

letter called “Third Corinthians,” a narrative epic called “The Acts of Paul and Thecla,” and an “Apocalypse of Paul.” None were actually written by the apostle even though they claim him as the author. Of the thirteen letters attributed to St. Paul in our New Testament, probably six were written by someone else - perhaps by a disciple or by several of his disciples, all eager to apply the apostle’s teaching in new ways.

Today’s text from Ephesians ch. 4 is a perfect example of this. In St. Paul’s letters (the letters we know he wrote), he speaks frequently about “loving one’s neighbor,” “loving another,” and “love doing no wrong to a neighbor,” but he only sketches what loving a neighbor looks like in practice. The writer of Ephesians digs into the details, and gets specific, listing, like a litany, the practical ways to love a neighbor. Loving a neighbor, according to the writer, means putting away falsehood and speaking truth. Loving a neighbor, according to the writer, means not letting anger become hate. Loving a neighbor, according to the writer, means being productive with your hands so you can give to the needy - a verse that may have inspired St. Jerome six centuries ago to utter the famous phrase, “idle hands are the devil’s tools.” Loving a neighbor, according to the writer, means not speaking evil of another, but instead using gracious words that build up. Loving a neighbor, according to the writer, means not letting bitterness fester like an infection in the soul, but seeking ways to be free. And loving a neighbor, according to the writer, means being kind and tender and offering the gift of forgiveness. Truthful speech; productive hands that help the needy; kindness, forgiveness, a compassionate spirit. Ingredients in the recipe of loving a neighbor - of “living in love,” as the writer of Ephesians puts it.

Church is a laboratory where these values get tested and honed and forged as we strive for truth; as we work on our hearts to purge negativity; as we labor with our hands to help those in need; as we cultivate compassion, like beautiful flowers in the garden of our souls. And we do these things, because, as the writer of Ephesians says, we are each a part of a body - a body of Christ, yes, but even more, a single, human family where each person is loved equally by the God of love, who constantly moves through us, wooing us, urging us, inviting us, to imitate her - her kindness, her compassion, her truth, her grace. We might say that Ephesians 4 is a litany of practical advice for living well - living morally - in a Twitter world.

...On Thursday NBC News published a story on its website about the life-changing power of living in love.⁶ “One year ago,” the story begins, “Ken Parker joined hundreds of other white nationalists at a Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. That day, he wore a black shirt with two lightning bolts sewn onto the collar, the uniform of the National Socialist Movement, an American neo-Nazi group. In the past 12 months, his beliefs and path have been radically changed by the people he has met since the violent clash of white nationalists and counter protesters that led to the death of Heather Heyer Now he looks at the shirt he wore that day, laid out in his apartment ... , and sees it as a relic from a white nationalist past he has since left behind. ... As he lays out more paraphernalia on his living room coffee table, Parker’s cramped apartment starts to look like a museum - not just of the modern hate movement, but of his life for the past six years. He picks up a green robe from his time as a grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan Parker said he felt the need to be in Charlottesville on Aug. 12, 2017, to ‘stand up for my white race. ...’ Hours before Heyer’s death, he and his group of neo-Nazis headed back to the parking garage to regroup after the rally was declared an unlawful assembly. There, he met a filmmaker, Deeyah Khan, who was filming the event

⁶ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/ex-ku-klux-member-denounces-hate-groups-one-year-after-rallying-n899326>

for a documentary on hate groups He recall[ed] Khan's kindness in a moment of his weakness. 'I pretty much had heat exhaustion after the rally because we like to wear our black uniforms, and I drank a big Red Bull before the event. And I was hurting and she was trying to make sure I was OK,' Parker [said]. In the film, Parker is still unabashedly racist, vehemently stating his hatred for Jews and gay people. But as he interacted with Khan more, his proclamations became less certain. Then, over the next few months, he started having doubts. 'She was completely respectful to me and my fiancée the whole time,' he [said] of Khan. 'And so that kind of got me thinking: She's a really nice lady. Just because she's got darker skin and believes in a different god than the god I believe in, why am I hating these people?' A few months later, Parker was still weighing those doubts when he saw an African-American neighbor having a cookout near the pool of his apartment complex. As the sun set and the crowd thinned, Parker and his then-girlfriend approached the man, William McKinnon III, a pastor at All Saints Holiness Church. Parker didn't know McKinnon was a pastor at first, but says he knew there was something different about him. ... [They talked for a while.] Soon after, McKinnon invited Parker to the church's Easter service. And on April 17, 2018 - six years after he joined the Klan and just seven months after Charlottesville - Parker decided he'd had enough. A month after that, he stood before the mostly African-American congregation of his new church and testified. 'I said I was a grand dragon of the KKK, and then the Klan wasn't hateful enough for me, so I decided to become a Nazi - and a lot of them, their jaws about hit the floor and their eyes got real big,' Parker recall[ed]. 'But after the service, not a single one of them had anything negative to say. They ... all [kept] coming up and hugging me and shaking my hand, you know, building me up instead of tearing me down.' From there, the transformation sped up. On July 21, wearing a different kind of robe, Parker waded into the Atlantic [Ocean] surrounded by members of that same church. McKinnon embraced him, and then dipped his head down into the water to baptize him. He rose up, blinking and wiping water from his face, then walked toward a line of fellow congregants waiting for a hug. Then this [past] Monday, Parker took off his shirt at the Laser Skin Solutions tattoo-removal clinic ... , revealing a swastika and the Klan symbol," and began laser treatment to remove these signs of hate from his skin.

...Ken Parker's story is a testament, I think, to the power of Ephesians 4. About how truth and kindness and tenderness and compassion and forgiveness - all in the name of love - can transform anyone's world. Amen.