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Construction vs. Demolition
Ephesians 4: 1-16, 25-5:2

I'll start by asking those of you who went on the mission trip this past week a question--- did you tear anything down? --- did any of the repair work you did require you to demolish or take anything apart?

(See what the answers are -- go from there)

How long did it take to tear down? How long to build something new?

My point is that demolition usually goes much quicker than construction. An old building can be blasted and turned into rubble in a matter of minutes—building a new one can take months and years.

And as it is with buildings, so it is with relationships. So it is with our Christian lives. And so it is with the community of faith. Building up is harder than tearing down. Building up takes more time and requires more effort. And it seems that building up is something we all need more training in. For unless professional skill is absolutely necessary, most of us can just go at it when it's time to demolish something. Not every one needs to be trained to tear down a wall, or a garage or a deck or an old piece of furniture. And we certainly don't need training for the personal kinds of demolition work we get involved in, do we? How easy it is for us to tear down. Through anger. Through thoughtless words. Through insults, Through mean-spiritedness. Through gossip and rumors. Through jealousy. Through pettiness. Through violence. Through prejudice. Through control and dominance and so on. Who here has never been hurt by someone else's words or actions? And who here has never spoken before thinking, or acted in haste without considering all the consequences or made inadequate judgments and caused harm by our choices? Who here needs training or instruction in how to tear down? Does anyone here need lessons in demolition?

But all of us can use some help, I suspect, when it comes to building up. All of us can benefit from some construction education. There may be, as the prophet Jeremiah announced, a right time for tearing down as well as for building up. People of faith have been called through the ages to tear down those things that oppress and harm God's children, like political and economic systems of injustice, like systems of hatred and violence and corruption. From Bible times to modern times. So there are, of course, times when we need to tear down in order to build up. But in terms of our relationships, in terms of how we treat each other, in terms of living in community, in terms of moral responsibility, the Bible teaches us more, I think, about construction than it does demolition. The Bible urges us to build each other up.

And what Paul gives us in his letter to the Ephesians is a refresher course in constructive Christian behavior -- a review of some of the ethical implications of our faith. For there are implications, you know. And we need to learn them and put them into practice. They're not easy -- they take our conscientious thought and effort to implement. In the heat of the moment, or when we're dealing with each other in our families or in our own church, reacting with demolition may come easier. But it's not God's way. God calls us to be builders, not destroyers.

And Ephesians isn't the only place we can find such behavior guidelines. Throughout the Bible are similar summaries of how to live as people of faith. Some are probably pretty familiar to us -- like the 10 commandments in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. Or the Golden Rule in Matthew: "In everything do to others as you have them do to you." Or Micah's prophetic call to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God, or the great commandment to love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might and to love your neighbor as yourself, as stated in Deuteronomy and Leviticus and Matthew. Or Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." "love your enemies." "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged." Even if we don't know the Bible very well, we've probably heard at least some of these ethical teachings. We know at least in some vague way that Christians are expected to live and act in ways that honor God. Right?

Well, Paul's instructions in Ephesians -- like those in other places in the New Testament -- get more specific. We read a big chunk of those instructions a little while ago. Now I want to highlight a few sections.

First, "speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ....So then, putting away falsehood let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another."

Speaking the truth in love. Both parts of that imperative are important. To speak the truth. And to speak it in love. Not to tear down, but to build up. Not to hurt just to hurt, but to be honest so that growth can occur. And part of the truth we are to speak is that we are members of one another. The Christian church is, whether we always feel like it or not, a community, a fellowship, a family, a connected inter-related group of people. We are not all alike. We are not all at the same place in our spiritual journeys. We don't all share the same religious experiences or look at things in the same way. Personality types differ. So do opinions and perspectives and even deep-seated convictions. But still we are members of one another. And we are to treat each other with genuine and honest respect. Speaking the truth to each other -- not in judgment, not in disparagement, not in vindictiveness -- but in love. "Putting away all bitterness and wrath and anger, and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and being kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you." The church is not just for people who all think and act and look the same. And while we at Redeemer may think we already know that, it's good for us to hear it again anyway. The church is not an exclusive country club. Young, old. Poor, Rich. Mentally ill. Mentally healthy. New Christians. Experienced Christians. Traditional

worship lovers. Contemporary worship lovers. Jazz and gospel music lovers. Folk and rock and hip-hop music lovers. Theologically more liberal. Theologically more conservative. Quiet. Outspoken. Widowed. Divorced. Married. Partnered. Single. Bi-sexual. Trans-gender. Homosexual. Heterosexual. People with vivid pasts. People who've always lived by the straight and narrow. People with regrets. People with hopes and dreams. The church has them all. Every church has them all. Those who know they have them all and those who don't. And we are members of one another. And so we are, as Paul writes, to bear with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Why? Because there is only one body and one Spirit. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all." One God and Father of us all -- me, and you, and you and you. Even if we differ, still we share the same God and the same Divine Parent. Still we are related as members of the household of God.

There's more. "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." Did you hear that? Let only talk that is useful for building up come out of your mouths. We are, as Christ's people, to speak the language of construction, not demolition. We are to bring out the good in each other. We are to help each other be built up in love. So what does that mean? No gossiping about each other. No name-calling. No put-downs. No criticisms that serve only to hurt and not to help. No belittling. No ridiculing. In my years of being a pastor, I learned how long it takes to undo the damage caused by demolition. There are a lot of people out there, and in here too, who have been deeply hurt by words and actions of demolition. Verbal abuse leaves lasting scars.

I came across an article in the ScienceDaily which reports on a study by Florida State University researchers who found that people who were verbally abused as children grow up to self-critical adults prone to depression and anxiety. "We must try to educate parents about the long-term effects of verbal abuse on their children," says psychology professor Natalie Sachs-Ericsson. "The old saying about sticks and stones was wrong. Names will forever hurt you." The verbal abuse described in the study included insults, swearing, threats of physical abuse and spiteful comments or behavior. Over time, children believe the negative things they hear, and they begin to use those negative statements as explanations for anything that goes wrong. For instance, a child who does not get invited to a party or who does poorly on a test will think the reason is because he or she is no good for that is the message conveyed by a parent. This pattern of self-criticism continues into adulthood and has been shown to make an individual more prone to depression and anxiety." (ScienceDaily – May 22, 2006 – www.sciencedaily.com)

Recovering from such abuse may take a life time. And there are people who never recover. So our words and our actions matter. I will never forget the moment of revelation I experienced when a young woman from my first church came to spend the weekend with me a number of years after I had left that church. She grew up in a family that didn't treat each other well. I had intervened a number of times -- including reporting the father to the police and then doing what I could to make sure he got some

therapy when he was imprisoned. The girl was always being put down by her parents. They seemed to favor the two younger daughters, and never gave the oldest as much attention or affection. So the girl sought out affection, and we had dealt with those issues too. And now here she was for this weekend, years later, all grown up, but once again in a relationship with a man who was abusive. I remember just looking at her at some point in our conversation and telling her how lovely she was, how special she was, that I loved her, and didn't want her to keep getting hurt. And at that point she just burst into tears, reached out to me, held onto me, and told me that in all the six years I was her pastor, and in all the years since, I was the only person in her life who had ever told her she was beautiful and that she was loved. I could hardly believe it. I challenged her a little on it. But I guess it really was true. No one in her family ever spoke words of construction to her. No one offered genuine, affirming affection. All she had ever known was demolition. And for me to tell her what I told her made all the difference in the world to her. Several years after that I spoke with her over the phone a few times -- she ended up getting into a healthy relationship and was planning on getting married. She had confidence in herself. She was involved in a church. She was getting her undergraduate degree, and after that a master's degree. She was happy. Her family was getting more counseling too, she said. Destructive patterns of behavior were being stopped. Healing and forgiveness were underway. Construction took a long time to happen in her life -- and it is still going on, I know. The harm all those years of demolition did was not easily undone. But speaking words of grace to her mattered. And that's what you and I are called to do -- because that young woman is by no means an isolated case. Hurts run deep in people's lives -- people we know -- people who find their way to our church -- people we encounter through our ministry and mission. And you and I are called to impart God's grace through the words we speak, through our actions, and through how we treat each other. God's way is the way of edification. And whenever we choose construction over demolition, God's grace finds a channel to flow through. When we build each other up, we are making room for God's love to grow.

I've given you a sheet of paper with two lists on it -- one list is titled Constructive Language; the other is called Destructive Language. Even if you don't think you have a problem with how you speak or treat others, look at these lists anyway, and have some internal conversation with yourself about how your own language and behavior. Think of the people you interact with -- your children, if you are parents. Your partner or spouse. Your boyfriend or girlfriend. Your co-workers. Your employees. Your students. Your patients. Your friends. The people you sit in church with. Do you speak words that build up or tear down? Are you encouraging or disparaging in your relationships and interactions with others? Are you looking for ways to make things better, or are you always pointing out what's wrong?

In an essay titled, "Are You Building Up or Tearing Down?" the writer uses the example of rocks being thrown in the water and causing ripples. "The things you do," he writes, "and the things you say can create ripples in the world. You can create good ripples or bad ones. An example of a good ripple would be when you send a card to encourage someone. Your small ripple of encouragement may cause that person to be able to be

lifted up enough to encourage other people that day. Then those people may encourage others and create ever widening ripples of encouragement which started with your tiny ripple. You also have the power to create bad ripples. If you use just one harsh word you may ruin a person's day, and that person may lash out at others and create an ever-widening circle of unhappy faces as they spread their discouragement in turn. Your small act may create a huge ripple of sadness....Whenever you are tempted to do or say something that may hurt someone, think of the huge amount of damage that could result. Keep in mind that when you are dealing with other people you are always going to create ripples of some kind. It is your choice to create good ones or bad ones. The good ones build people up and the bad ones tear them down....God is willing that you edify other people. He is ready, willing and able to help you...The strength you need to create ripples of love and encouragement comes from God. Remember, he concludes, you have a choice. Be a builder, not a bulldozer!" (www.clarioncall.org).

Which leads nicely to my final highlight of Paul's instructions to the Ephesians. "Therefore," he writes, "be imitators of God." Follow God's example. Do as God does. Choose God's way.

We aren't given a whole set of options here. There isn't a checklist. Personal preference isn't considered. As Christians we aren't to emulate our favorite TV or movie or sports star. It isn't our horoscope that is meant to guide our lives. We aren't to make decisions according to popular opinion. No -- we are to imitate God. Not to make ourselves into God, of course, but to do as God would do. As beloved children imitating a beloved parent, that's how we are to model our behavior as Christians in the world.

Sometimes this embarrasses those of us who are human parents. When our children imitate our behavior, especially if we've said or done something that shouldn't be imitated. We know how fallible we are. I can recall my fair share of such incidences in my years of parenting. A toddler son who asked at dinner one evening if I was going to the church for another dumb meeting. Another son who asked if the driver who was in front of me was a jerk. So I realized early on how well children listen to the words their parents speak. And even though we try to set a good example for our children, we know when we fall short. But there is no embarrassment for God. God does not fall short. God never leads his children astray. God never has to say, "Do as I say and not as I do." For God's words and God's actions always agree. God can always be trusted. So if we imitate God, we'll not go wrong. What better role model? What better teacher or advisor or coach or mentor than God -- as known to us in Jesus Christ?

Fellow members of the household of faith, when we imitate God, when we walk in love, for when all else is said and done, love really is the way of God, then the world is brought a little closer to the kingdom of God. I believe that. Salvation is nearer at hand whenever we put away bitterness and wrath and anger. Whenever we are kind to one another, tenderhearted and forgiving. Whenever we build each other up instead of tear each other down. Whenever we speak the truth in love -- and whenever, through our

words and our actions we impart God's grace -- then God's will indeed is being done, praise God, here on earth as it is in heaven.