

## Haustafeln

Psalm 130  
Ephesians 4:25-5:2

This week, at the Monday morning Bible study and in the office, people asked whether this week's sermon title is a typographical error. It is not. But I imagine none of you know what it means. It comes from the German, and is a compound noun, made up from two other nouns crammed together: Haus and Tafel. In German, Haus means house; Tafel means table. It is an idiom that refers to that one counter or table every house seems to have that catches all the *stuff* we do not know where else to put. Car keys, bills, that art project your kid made in the third grade, pocket change, pens, framed pictures: you name it, the Haustafel may very well have it. The New Testament contains several books with Haustafeln, and the term means something a bit different biblically. According to the Westminster Dictionary of Theology, Haustafeln means, "collections of instructions for the roles Christians are meant to play within the context of their families."

I would add that my understanding of Haustafeln does not include specific instructions for men, others for women, still others for children. Traditionally, interpreters *have* understood them in this way. But the text of the Bible begs to differ. Haustafeln tend, rather, to describe ways of living that apply to all, regardless of gender, age or other superficial descriptors. Our passage from Ephesians contains

one of these lists. It speaks not of women's work or men's supposed positions of dominance, but of "imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us out of love." With such clear advice, we can work out how to work it out in daily life.

Our verses begin with, "...let everyone speak the truth with his or her neighbor." This admonition covers all levels of communication, from the most trivial to the most consequential. Another world religion, which I will not name, advises its adherents to deceive people it considers non-believers. As a practical consequence, this sows distrust and makes peaceful relations much more difficult. The Senior Pastor of a large Christian church, working with its Personnel Committee, once determined that one of the Associate Pastors was not a good fit for his role. Sometimes these things happen. But the Senior Pastor asked the Committee to keep his decision to seek the Associate's dismissal a secret from him. To his face, the Senior man pretended all was well. Now, the form of government of the Presbyterian Church establishes that each pastor has a contract not with the Senior Pastor, nor even with the session, the elders. Each pastor has, rather, a contract with the whole congregation *and with the Presbytery*. This is an important thing to understand and is true of me, for that matter.

But in reality, the Senior Pastor of a big church has a lot of power. He was easily able to force out the Associate, who did not see it coming. A few days after their angry meeting at which the plot finally got revealed, the Senior Pastor's wife hosted a Christmas party for the whole staff and their spouses, *and the ousted Associate came*

*to it.* So did his wife, who told us, “There are skid marks all the way here from our house.” The consequence of this episode is that nobody on that staff could trust the Senior Pastor ever again. Had he summoned the courage to speak the truth in love the Associate's sense of self may not have been so badly wounded. He took the first church opening offered him and left within weeks. Years later, I bumped into him at a General Assembly meeting. He had not fully recovered.

Good news or bad, communicating carefully and honestly is an important tool to keep handy on that house table. Another pastor asked his small staff to join him every morning at 9:00am in his office. He would review that day's calendar for each one. (This was in the days before shared calendars on computers and phones.) He would ask, with obvious sincerity, how each person there was doing, and how were their families? Had anyone uncovered pastoral needs in the church that he could address? They would conclude with prayer. The husband and wife custodial team, included as equally valued staff members, tried to conceal his cancer diagnosis. But in less than a week, moved by the pastor's humility and caring manner, they came into the meeting to tell the truth about what was happening for them. Forgiveness for their temporary reluctance to speak flowed. It created a deeper bond on the staff.

“Be angry but do not sin,” the passage continues. At Monday morning's Bible study we all agreed that God gets angry. Anger itself can actually be a positive thing. But if it moves us to judge others, or to gossip, or to any of the myriad other ways in which we sin, we grieve God. And we can cause damage to relationships. Ideally, we

handle our anger by speaking directly to those who have angered us, explaining how we feel and why. We offer the opportunity to confess any guilt—whether ours or theirs—that may exist. As the great 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “It is the difference between a wound pierced and cleaned, and a wound left to fester.” In a word, *reconciliation* can happen when we tame our anger.

The next item on our table is, “Let the thief no longer steal...but let him do honest work...so that he may give to those in need.” Remember, we can steal more than money or jewels. We can steal intellectual property, ideas and innovations. We can steal joy. We can steal hope. Elsewhere in Ephesians, the Apostle Paul asks his readers to steward one another's gifts. Care for them. Tend them. Honest work in these cases requires that we actually celebrate the things others can think and do better than we can. The bass player in a church's praise band knew only about half the chords and lines he needed to know. He showed up on time for every rehearsal, he practiced at home. But he just did not quite have the capability to keep up with the others in the band. Along came a self-taught 10<sup>th</sup> grader who was honestly a prodigy on the bass. The incumbent player graciously volunteered to step aside. The kid *was* good. Meanwhile, the older, original player decided to offer his gifts through a major building project at the church. Bottom line: *everybody* won that time.

We press on to the next item on our table's checklist. “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying...that it may impart grace to those who hear.” This gives us two more terms to define: edify and grace. To edify is to

enlighten, to teach. Let your talk never darken other's understanding, certainly not in the Christian realm. Let it rather, whether with penetrating insight or simple, humble goodness, show people what following Jesus can mean. And what can it mean? Many of us had the privilege yesterday of attending the celebration for Molly Wadsworth. Three people spoke about her; each mentioned her gracious love. One of her sons gave an especially powerful testimony to it. He called himself a bit of a rebel when a teenager. He said that when he bucked against his parents' ideas of what he should, and should not, do, Molly would say to him, "I do *not* like what you are doing, but I still love you." He added that even then he knew her love was unconditional.

Then he put it all into a biblical context. He compared her love to God's. He said her love was not only unconditional, but steadfast. He knew it would never end. He could rely on her forever. He did not say this explicitly, but his words conveyed that her ability to edify—to teach by word and by example—brought him back from the destructive path on which he had embarked. This is grace. This is love. As Psalm 130 tells us, "If Thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared." This translation imparts the very formal manner in which the Psalm was written. Thou and Thee, and the "est" extensions on the verbs, establish the bottomless respect the Psalmist had the God. More importantly, the Psalm draws attention to two things: forgiveness and fear.

If God should fix on our iniquities, our sins, we could have no hope. We sin, all

of us, and if our sins disqualified us from God's love, we might just as well forget about it. "But there is forgiveness with" God. God loves us and forgives us despite—not because of—our actions. As the Psalmist concludes, "For with the Lord there is steadfast (there's that word again) love." Love that does not end, nor even falter, no matter how we might behave.

And fear. Fear of the Lord differs a bit from everyday, garden variety fear. Speaking of THE garden, I have an irrational and strong fear of snakes. Whenever I come across one I recoil. This is not exactly the flavor of fear of which this passage speaks. Fear of the Lord means that deepest respect, that sense of awe due to the divine. Psalm 130 tells us that God's incredibly gracious act of forgiveness to even the likes of us must inspire awe and gratitude.

I do not want to put any human being, not even Jesus, in the position of dominance, of deserving irrational fear from the rest of us. Certainly Molly Wadsworth would have recoiled from that just as sharply as I do from snakes. Yet she embodied to a great extent the qualities listed in the Ephesians Haustafeln. May we all act out these, as we see them not only in her but in one another, and may we pray to God that we find the ability to imitate Christ as she tried to do. I believe this is one of the most critical purposes of the church: to give those coming behind a Christlike example from those going before. Let us all be honest, truthful, careful how we process our anger, trustworthy, gracious.