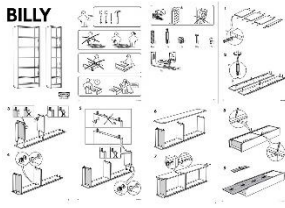


How many of you
have put together
an Ikea piece of furniture?

Tripp and I have had a couple pieces:
a drafting desk we use as a kitchen island,
a dresser or two
and we used to have an armoire.



One of the dressers I put together
all by myself,
which made me feel like I had mastered
an unspoken urban myth
...that putting together
a large piece of Ikea furniture alone,
couldn't be done.
I mean, Ikea gives you a lot of parts
and a lot of pages of instructions.

This is just an example and of course,
and with most anything else,
like a recipe or setting up your newest smart phone
—you've got to follow a set of instructions.
I know there are some renegades out there
who scoff at directions
and thick booklets in 8 different languages
about how to operate your vacuum.

But for most of us,
a set of instructions proves helpful.
If we want the vacuum
or the phone to work properly,
if we want the dresser or dining table to hold up,
the instructions or directions help us

bring all the pieces together
to a unified whole.

And speaking of directions
I often *chuckle*, wait no,
that's not true.
I often *smirk*



at billboards or decorative license plates,
that have a picture of a black leather-bound Bible
and say things like, 'Follow directions'
or 'When all else fails,
read instructions'.

I just think that acting as though Scripture
is a complete set of instructions
is short-sided and misguided.
It treats the whole biblical witness unfairly.

So now, our reading this morning
comes Eph. 4:25-5:2...

²⁵So then, putting away falsehood,
let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors,
for we are members of one another.

²⁶Be angry but do not sin;
do not let the sun go down on your anger,
²⁷and do not make room for the devil.

²⁸Thieves 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.

²⁹Let 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.

³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God,
with which you were marked
with a seal for the day of redemption.

³¹Put away from you
all bitterness and wrath and anger
and wrangling and slander,
together with all malice,
³²and be kind to one another,
tenderhearted, forgiving one another,
as God in Christ has forgiven you.

⁵Therefore be imitators of God,
as beloved children,
²and live in love,
as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us,
a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Okay well.
That sounds a lot
like a set of instructions, doesn't it?



A hearty Christian, tee-tow-er list
of do's and don'ts.

But I think we could replace
those billboards and license plate tags
with another motto:
'The New Testament *doesn't give directions,*
it gives direction.'

Isn't that more clever?

This passage for today
starts out with “so then,”
which means Paul is continuing a thought
from previously in the letter.

Earlier in chapter 2
he reminds the church,
“...remember that at one time
you Gentiles by birth...
you were at one time without Christ
...strangers to the covenants of promise,
having no hope
and without God in the world.
But now in Christ Jesus
you who once were far off
have been brought near
by the blood of Christ.” (2:11-13)

And earlier in chapter 4 he says,
“Now this I affirm and insist on
in the Lord:
you must no longer live
as the Gentiles live...

you were taught
to put away your former way of life,
your old self,
corrupt and deluded by its lusts,
and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds
and to clothe yourselves
with the new self,
created according to the likeness of God
in true righteousness and holiness
...so then...” (4:17, 22-24)

Paul spends considerable time
painting a picture for this church in Ephesus;
a plan that outlines the whole letter—
that in Christ,

God has a plan for the fullness of time,
to gather up all thing in him,
things in heaven and things on earth.” (1:10).

And then after he thoroughly explains
that Gentiles and Jews
are part of this grand divine plan,
they both are part of this unified body of Christ
he offers some *direction*.

Paul used the first three chapters of this letter
to direct the early church
toward unity.

Dennis jokingly asked me the other day
if I was glad last week
not to have to preach another sermon on unity
...YES!

Having explained
why these two groups of people
who have been brought near in Christ—
in these last 3 chapters of this letter
Paul get down to the brass tacks
of *how* to be a more unified whole,
how to be put together as the body of Christ.

He offers some *direction* and *instruction*
about how to live this new life together;
how this new self should act;
what this new existence
called church should look like.

And lest we be tempted
to bullet point this list,
making these ethical guidelines or
making these moral instructions
into a check list for daily completion,
this passage outlines the emphasis
not on one-and-done salvation theology
but on the Christian life
which involves ongoing transformation.

Most of us know the difference
but let me use an example.

I used to sing a song in elementary school,
when I attended a small private Christian school
that went like this
—we'd start out slowly:

“I am a C.

I am a C-h.

I am C-h-r-i-s-t-i-a-n.

And I have C-h-r-i-s-t

in my h-e-a-r-t

and I will l-i-v-e-e-t-e-r-n-a-l-l-y.”

Though a cute song

and has always helped my spelling,

it lacks any hint to a life

that has experienced the good news of Christ,
a life transformed.

Instead it focuses only

on a one-and-done salvific moment theology

rather than the ongoing work

that is required

to live as the body of Christ.

That's what Paul is really trying to get at

when he talks about unity

within the church.

The ongoing work that is required,

the work that is built into the system of unity.

For Paul, it all stems from baptism.

It is what he means

when he speaks of the dying and rising in Christ;

baptism is the basis

for Christian living for Paul.¹

Early converts to Christianity

had such a rich baptismal ritual.

Not that I don't love

our baptismal sprinkle.

¹ Mark Tranvick, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-19-2/commentary-on-ephesians-425-52>

But take a look at these early baptismal pools.



They were often cruciform...

you literally had to take off your old clothes
and put on a plain robe,
walk down into the water
symbolizing dying a death like Christ;
dying a death to your former life.

Then you would then come out the other side,
rising to new life with Christ,
and you'd receive a new robe (new clothes!).

For Paul and these early Christians at Ephesus,
your life was expected to look different
after you encounter the message
of liberation and salvation in Jesus.

This is where it gets a little hard.

I struggle with this.

I'm too Presbyterian to remember
when anything before.

Most of us don't remember our own baptisms, do we?

You've done such a good job,

that I believe with everything I am
that there has never been
and never will be

a moment when I'm not claimed
and loved by God.

And I believe that about
each and every one of us.

But because it has mostly always been our reality,
to go to church and learn about our faith,

I wonder if we all struggle a little
with wondering if our lives
look transformed.

And even more so,
what does it mean
to live a transformed life,
when the practical living out of our faith
is so often tied to a place:
mostly on the corner of 2nd St and 3rd Ave?

What do we do
when it may not be safe to come here?
Or when coming here
looks and feels so different?



Here's what is so striking to me.
This is a text written 2000+ years ago.
A time when the Temple was gone
—it had been destroyed.
So, with no Temple,
and a new religious branch
springing from Judaism's roots,
the place where God dwelled
became the body of Christ.
That's what the Holy Spirit enabled—
a body of believers
where who God was and is,
would come alive.
God dwelling in us!

And now, on the heels of a pandemic
whose grip won't loosen
around our lives—
we find ourselves

somewhat reluctant
to come back to a building.

Have we grown too comfortable
with the idea that God
lives here?

Our sermon is no different
than First Church Ephesus—
God comes alive through the power of Christ
alive in the body of believers
...not the building
but the unified body.

So then, a life transformed
means the work of Christ is accomplished
through flawed, cranky,
joyful and sour people.
People who will not get it right
half the time
but are willing to keep trying.
People—you and me—
who want to be slow to anger
but often pretty hot tempered.

So, Paul reminds us,
transformation looks like this:
when you are angry,
don't let it lead you to sin.
He never says,
Christians can't be angry.
It's human nature to be angry.
And some things are worth
being angry about!
But don't let your anger
lead you to a place
where sin can get a foothold.
Anger festers really well.

And “[O]nce we have slipped into
[the] realm of revenge
we have opened the door for the devil (4:27).
[And we are blinded by revenge]
The well-being of [our] community
becomes secondary
and our main purpose is simply to get even.
That’s why Paul reminds us
of the need to let forgiveness
have the last word (4:32).”²

People—like you and me—
who want to forgive
just as God forgives us,
people like us
who want to be able to forgive 7 times 70
but in reality, possess superpowers
in either holding a grudge
or being passive aggressive.



Paul says, in a transformed life,
we work on imitating God.
A God he claims is rich in mercy.
When we learn to forgive
the way God forgives
we do so without anger
and without bitterness or malice.
And that isn’t a one-time thing,
that is ongoing work.

² ibid

Whoever wrote this letter
to the First Church of Ephesus,
whether it was Paul or not,
whoever wrote this
knew his congregation.
And it seems like all these years later,
the writer of this letter
knew our congregation too,
and all congregations for that matter.

Which leads me to think that Scripture really isn't
some instruction manual
for how to have the perfectly polished church
or how to put together
piece by piece,
a unified congregation.

But this letter in our Scriptures
does give us some *direction*
that being kind, tenderhearted and forgiving
really do help us see,
that a baptize life,
a transformed life,
leaves the old and former things behind
and instead is ready to
do the ongoing work
to be a C-h-r-i-s-t-i-a-n.