“Look both ways before crossing the street.” “Behave yourself.” “Say please and thank you.” Words of wisdom spoken for generations by parents to their children. Timeless words of wisdom that are as true and important today as the day the first parent spoke them. Oh, let me mention one other – “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say it.” Timeless yes, true and important, yes, still valued – not so much.

The rise of things like social media has made being critical extremely easy and sadly, prolific today. People these days seem to feel they can say anything they want, anytime they want, no matter how mean-spirited or critical. Sometimes it seems, doesn’t it, that there isn’t a thought somebody thinks that isn’t conveyed – for good or for ill?

Whether it’s about politicians or Hollywood stars, the way someone dresses or looks, whether or not you’re deemed patriotic – well, the list goes on and on – people feel very free being critical. And yes, it even happens in matters of faith.

If you’ve ever had a conversation with a person who doesn’t go to church, you’ve probably heard that old stock argument, “I don’t go to church because everybody there is a hypocrite!” well, then, you know what I’m talking about. Sometimes, it seems as if people of faith have targets on our backs, just because we are people of faith.

We’re criticized because we think some things are right and some things are wrong, we’re made sport of because we believe in something and Someone greater than ourselves, we’re called weak because we lean on God and not ourselves, we have our intellect called into question because we can’t prove scientifically that God is real. You know the routine – you’ve probably heard some of these things from non-believers.

And truth be told, it’s tough when criticism comes our way. Do you remember me telling you that a long time ago, just when I had started in ministry, so that’s thirty years ago now, a lot of the youth in the youth group I was leading at my first church were missing worship and Sunday School a lot because of band competitions with the local high schools. Now, mind you, the competitions didn’t start until Sunday afternoon, but the directors wanted the kids there about 9:00 in the morning. So, naïve young pastor that I was, I wrote a note to one of the band directors, and explained the situation – that since the competition wasn’t until later
in the afternoon, could he not have the students come a little later so they could attend church. Sadly, the director never wrote back to me, but here's what he did do. At the next band practice, he announced loudly to the entire band the time they were expected to be there the next Sunday, and then he added, “Except for you kids who go to Aldersgate – you’ve got to go to church first or your pastor will get mad” – in quite a derogatory and cynical way. Apparently, everybody got a good laugh out of it, except the church kids, who were made to feel embarrassed.

You know what? Jesus knew this was going to happen. In fact, he spoke about it in the famous “Sermon on the Mount.” This is Eugene Peterson’s translation of it according to The Message, from the fifth chapter of Matthew –

“You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom. Not only that – count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens – give a cheer, even! – for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.” (Matthew 5:10-12)

It seems that the Apostle Paul remembered that when he wrote this letter to the Colossians, doesn’t it? As you recall from last week, the young church at Colossae was under attack by outside forces trying to discredit them, and educate them, and send them in all sorts of strange directions. So Paul writes to them to bolster them up, straighten them out, strengthen them for the road ahead – because he knows it’s only going to get worse the more successful they are as a church. You see, that’s the way the devil is – when things are going well, that’s when he brings his forces of evil into play. He is threatened when things are going well in the Lord’s camp.

So in this part of Paul’s letter to the Colossians, this second chapter, Paul says straight out, “Don’t let anyone condemn you, don’t let anyone disqualify you. Stay strong! Be true to yourselves, true to God, true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Keep your heads up!”

And he told them the same way he told them last week. Remember, I said that he was very positive in his response to the situation they were facing – the heresies that were coming their way. Remember that, instead of condemning the Colossians for being weak, or putting down the forces that were trying to influence the young church, that Paul instead chose to be very positive, focusing on the message of Jesus Christ, on who he is, and what he has done, and how life has changed forever because of it.

Again, here in this second chapter, Paul keeps it positive. He reminds the Colossians again of who Christ Jesus is, of who they were before Christ, and who they are after having received Christ. He reminds them that they are changed
people, and that they are strong in Jesus. “Therefore,” he says, “don’t let anyone disqualify you.” You are above all that! “Don’t fight fire with fire, fight fire with the love of Jesus Christ!”

Paul was reminding them that the truth was on their side – they didn’t need to stoop to the level of their critics – rather they needed to keep their heads up and speak the truth. Period.

You see, Paul was well acquainted with criticism. You remember Paul’s story, don’t you? Paul was originally called Saul, and he was one of the greatest persecutors, if not the greatest persecutor, of the early church ever. He did anything and everything he could to squelch this new movement of people who followed Jesus of Nazareth. Until one day, God broke through to him as he travelled on the road to Damascus. He was literally knocked to the ground, and rendered blind, as God worked in a mighty way in his life and turned it completely around. Paul accepted Jesus as the Lord of his life, and from that moment on, turned the fervor with which he had previously opposed the church, into a fervor that would set the church on fire and cause it to grow and grow and grow.

Imagine then, the kind of criticism that came Paul’s way from those who knew him “back then . . . before.” Imagine the cynicism, imagine the smart comments that were thrown at him, imagine how people made sport of Paul and his “supposed conversion.”

Yet, every time that came his way, what did Paul do? Exactly what he tells the Colossians to do – “Keep your head up, and speak the truth. Tell the story of Jesus. Tell what you know, tell who you are and whose you are. That will be enough.”

People will come to understand over time who you are as they watch you. So keep your head up, be strong, be true to your faith, true to Christ and let the words of your critics roll off your back – or as Jesus said in this morning’s Gospel lesson, “Kick the dust off your feet and move on!”

Paul knows that it will be their continuous faithfulness, their on-going witness to Jesus, their on-going faithfulness in living the Gospel life that will finally put the criticisms to rest. So he encourages the Colossians to keep the faith, keep on doing the right thing, be positive, and in the end, all will be well. People will see, as they watch them, and will come to understand the reality of a life in Christ.

I read a very moving story this week that proves how lives lived in faithfulness speak for themselves, despite criticism from others. It’s about a man who was a raging alcoholic. His name was Joe. For years Joe struggled with that addiction, until he finally hit rock bottom and walked into a mission in the Bowery in New York looking for help. Early in his time there, he was convicted by the Holy Spirit and took Jesus as his Lord and Savior, and everything changed for him. When previously he was cynical, dirty and totally self-absorbed, now he was humble, caring and did whatever he could to help others.
Joe would spend his days and nights at the Bowery mission trying to help others. There was no task too lowly that he wouldn’t take on. He would change beds, mop floors, clean up after someone had gotten sick, sit up with someone all night as he struggled with recovery – and he did it all with a smile on his face and a calm and caring demeanor.

One night, when the director of the mission was delivering his sermon to the crowd, and he had an altar call, one man came down the aisle, knelt down before him, and cried out for God to help him change. The repentant man kept shouting, “Make me like Joe! Make me like Joe!” Well, the director of the mission was a little startled, and he knelt down and whispered in the man’s ear, “Son, I think it would be better if you prayed, ‘Make me like Jesus.’

The man looked up at the director with a quizzical expression on his face and asked, “Is he like Joe?” (On-line, “Don’t Let Anyone Look Down on You,” Alan Balatbat)

Sometimes, friends, people will come to know Jesus by looking at us, at how we live and how we love. Paul knew that and it’s one of the reasons he gave this wise advice to the Colossians about how to respond to their critics. Keep your head up, speak the truth, live the truth, share the Gospel – let that be your response.

Clearly, friends, as is the case with all of scripture, this story is not just about a certain church in a certain time – it’s about you and me as well. What Paul wrote to the Colossians, he could just as well be writing to us, because you and I face our own critics, don’t we? And it hurts us just like it hurt them. And, I dare say, our first inclination is to fight back – to fight fire with fire – to stoop to their level.

Yet, Paul would remind us today, that as people of Christ, we are called to a better way, a more excellent way as he says in Corinthians – the way of love. We are called too, to keep our heads up, know the truth, speak the truth and live the truth. We need to remember who we are and whose we are – that we are worthy and valuable simply because God loves us – and that is enough.

So, do not let anyone condemn you or disqualify you, for you are a child of God, a disciple of Christ. Keep your head up, keep the faith, live and speak the truth in such a way that others will want to know the living Christ too! May it be so.

Amen.