

Speaking the Truth in Love

Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16

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We have changed worship today because of Hurricane Henri, and I know we want to hear things in a sermon that deal with contemporary reality. So, I'll try to work in a hurricane story in this sermon somewhere. But first, let me tell you that today's sermon is about truth. And love.

You may or may not know, or care, that I studied Sociology for a while. Specifically, I was interested in the sociology of organizations. I'm going to read you a quotation from the kind of stuff that I read while I was studying these things, partly because I never try to be merely academic (well, almost never) and partly because this quotation speaks to today's lesson, and to our whole endeavor to be Christians in today's world.

This is from a chapter titled, "Bringing Society Back In: Symbols, Practices, and Institutional Contradictions." in a book of essays called, The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis. Have I lost you already? Hope not. Here goes:

"The institutional logic of capitalism is accumulation and the commodification of human activity. That of the state is rationalization and the regulation of human activity by legal and bureaucratic hierarchies. That of democracy is participation and the extension of popular control over human activity. That of the family is community and the motivation of human activity by unconditional loyalty to its members and their reproductive needs. That of religion, or science for that matter, is truth, whether mundane or transcendental, and the symbolic construction of reality within which all human activity takes place." (Friedland and Alford, 1991, pp. 248-249)

So, we are going to talk about truth today. But we are going to do so in the most important context for truth that is possible: God's love for us, for all of us. There are probably no more important words in all of the Epistles than the words we find in today's lesson from Ephesians, where it says, "...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ..." The phrase, "speaking the truth in love," is particularly critical for our lives as Christians and for the times in which we live, because so few people actually do speak the truth in love. Note that there are two issues at work in that phrase, of equal importance: there is truth, and there is love. It is the combination of the two that Paul urges upon us. And what I want us to understand today is that, in the interrelationship between truth and love, it is the love that makes the truth come alive in the world. I believe that the reason that truth is so contested today is that too many people, including us, have lost sight of the importance and power of love: God's love for us, and our love for each other. And thus, with love gone, truth is gone, too.

Who speaks the truth these days? And how is it spoken? Tucker Carlson speaks the truth, according to some. And Rachel Madow does for others. For some people, no one speaks the truth. With all of our mass communications capabilities and our penchant for publicity, we find ourselves assaulted by vast amounts of information and a relentless array of "spin", but not

necessarily any truth, and even less, any attention to what really constitutes truth --so which is truth? Every day we are called upon to decide.

Fortunately, we, who call ourselves Christian, are named by what we believe is our basis for discovering truth. We have a very good handle on where to begin: with the truth we believe God revealed to us in the Christ event. We all know, for instance, that Jesus speaks the truth --- that is why we study scripture and teachings and theology. But we also profess as Christians that the Christ is the truth for the world, which is to say that all of our realities are to be judged by what Christ would call us to do or to be. The knowledge of the truth in Christ, however, doesn't necessarily make everything simple, or easy, or clear. But, it does mean that we know where to begin and end our understanding of the truth: we begin and end with the God who is revealed in Jesus.

The author of Ephesians, however, goes well beyond a call to define or understand truth in our lives. Ephesians calls us to speak the truth, our truth in Christ---he calls upon us to speak that truth in love, and so grow into mature people. I want to emphasize the call to speak the truth in love. For what will make a difference in your life, and in the lives of the people you encounter in the world, is not simply to find truth, but to be able to speak it in love. It is the love that makes the truth come alive in the world. Too often, though, we fall into the trap of speaking not in love, but instead, in hatred, or anger, or fear. Those emotions tend to invalidate whatever it is we say, and they also almost inevitably destroy the relationships we have with the people around us. Let me give you an example...

Truth is a contentious commodity in today's world. If we need an example of that, we could hardly do better than the four Capitol Hill Police officers testifying in Congress a few weeks ago. I know that Amie mentioned this scene in her sermon a couple weeks back, too. It was a power set of testimonies. One of the officers, Private First Class Harry Dunn, mused on the importance of truth in his testimony. In case you didn't catch it, here is part of what he said:

Dunn said that the investigation is innately political because of the landscape surrounding the attack, but that it shouldn't stop lawmakers from seeking the truth.

"It's not a secret that it was political. They literally were there to stop the steal. So when people say it shouldn't be political, it is. It was and it is. There's no getting around that," he said.

"Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger are being lauded as courageous heroes and while I agree with that notion, why? Because they told the truth? Why is telling the truth hard?" he asked. "I guess in this America, it is."

Our faith, and Paul's letter to the Ephesians, tells us that part of the answer to Officer Dunn's question, "Why is telling the truth hard?" — is that truth without love is simply not enough.

So, here comes the hurricane part I promised you. The only time I ever had someone walk out on me during a sermon had to do with a hurricane. Actually, four of them. Remember the summer when there was something like four hurricanes in a row that hit Florida? Well, I was preaching about original sin, one Sunday that summer, and during my sermon, I asked

something along the lines of “shouldn’t we be asking ourselves if we humans have had a role in creating these hurricanes? Isn’t it possible that global warming has played a role in this?”

I thought I was speaking a truth — or at least asking a question that might lead us to a truth, and I thought it was done in a loving way. But maybe not. At any rate, one guy jumped up at the words “global warming” and started yelling about how he didn’t want to hear any politics, and loudly fuming about how terrible this was, he stomped out.

So, the truth is hard sometimes. His stomping out on my sermon was over a decade ago, so things have changed a bit about our perspectives on climate change and global warming. There aren’t as many people now who are not wondering about climate change in the face of some strange hurricanes, too many wildfires, and too many droughts, and also, the really weird floods in Germany and Belgium this year.

At any rate, you can see that the truth is only part of the issue. It’s the love that matters, and I still grieve that I didn’t get the love part right enough in that sermon so that he might not have stomped out.

Oh, and I can think of another example that might resonate with just about everyone. Judy and I spent some time — too much time, actually — at the Department of Motor Vehicles this week. A true test of Christian maturity is to try to speak the truth in love at the DMV. I’m not sure it is possible, and I am completely sure that it is really, really hard to do.

You see, it takes maturity to speak from love, as the letter to the Ephesians reminds us, and anger, particularly allowing our anger to be our first resource is almost always a sign of immaturity, of childishness, which is specifically what the message of Ephesians warns against, inviting us into “maturity” and “the full stature of Christ.” In fact, the letter tells us basically to “grow up.” So, often the content of our message is much less important than the emotion with which it is communicated. If the love in our souls is genuine, we are in better shape than if we have our facts straight but our hearts full of hatred. The Christ event defines for us what our standard of truth will be, but it is the love of God in our actions and demeanors that make that truth visible. Or not, as the case may be. [[[it also defines what love looks like]]]?

You can see for yourself the power of Paul's words: Sometime, maybe even today around the Sunday dinner table, listen to what the people around you say. But don't listen as much to their words, or their ideas, or their opinions. Use that "special ear" that we all have and listen instead to the emotion that powers their speech. Listen to see if you hear love empowering the conversation, or something else.

Listen to someone talk about, say, refugees, or immigrants, and see if you can't hear what emotion is really at work and how destructive of hope and relationship that emotion is. Listen to a young person talking about the "in crowd" and discover jealousy at work there. Listen to someone bragging about, well, about just about anything, and see if you can't hear fear lurking just beneath the surface.

Then see whether the love that you know in Christ can be shown in what you say, and how you act --- you'll be amazed at the impact you will have if you try. You'll be amazed at how one kind

word, one appreciative nod, one sympathetic gesture--how any of these can affect the people around you.

Or you may find yourself confronting a very painful situation, involving words of truth that are quite difficult to share: we all know that the truth is not always sweet, easy, and complimentary. Sometimes it is harsh, jarring, and causes pain--- confrontations with alcoholics/addicts come immediately to my mind. Those words, especially, need to be spoken because of love, and not for any other reason. Before we speak, Paul would have us think, "how does love compel me to respond in this situation?" For it is the love in our lives that is the only hope of making the truth of our words be able to be heard.

Yes, people want to speak the truth, especially their own truths. But what the letter to the Ephesians reminds us today, and what the life of Jesus is a testimony for, is that speaking the truth is only important if we are speaking the truth with love. The mandate of our faith is not merely to receive God's love willingly and gratefully, but also to respond with maturity, telling the truth, but always asking ourselves how the love of God compels us to respond.

So I said at the beginning that this sermon would be about truth, so let's circle back to truth as I wrap up. Truth, and love.

Here are a couple of truths, upon which we base our entire faith: God loves you. And God loves that person whom you can't stand, too. So when we seek to speak other truths, remember that love. And use it in as Godly a way as you possibly can. I'm amazed how vital that simple admonition has become. Amen.