

Speaking the Truth in Love
Ephesians 4
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Intro:

It's a simple but reliable principle of human life: how people talk reveals a lot about who they are. Imagine a person comes up to you and says this: "I was out driving the other day when I had a punctured tyre. I pulled off to the verge and opened the boot. There was no extra. So, I opened the bonnet. Fortunately, a lorry driver saw the raised bonnet and stopped to help me out."

Anyone who follows that has likely spent some time in the British Isles or maybe South Africa. Winston Churchill once said the English and Americans are "two great peoples divided by a common language," and this is a case in point.

The American translation of what I just shared: "I was out driving the other day when I had a flat tire. I pulled off to the shoulder and opened the trunk. There was no spare. So, I opened the hood. Fortunately, a truck driver saw the raised hood and stopped to help me out." (homileticonline.com)

The way we talk can reveal a lot about who we are, where we live, how we get along, and even what we think about or how we live out our faith and commitment to Jesus; what kind of Christian we are. What kind of church we are. The way we talk influences the way others hear us, listen to us, or not listen to us. It has nothing to do with accent or vocabulary or grammar. It has everything to do with how we use the gift of speech and reliance on the Holy Spirit.

In the weeks and months following the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples had to come together and learn to share the message of Jesus in a way that people would be drawn to and understand. And sometimes, as the saying goes, they had to use words. It wasn't only the language or the vocabulary that the followers of Jesus used but the actions toward one another that was the biggest influence on those around them.

In the years and decades following the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples and the early church had to learn to be the example of God's Kingdom here on earth and to do so, they had to speak the truth in love and operate out of a place of unity. That begs the question, how do we speak the truth?

Prayer: Dear God - Not because of who we are but because of what you have done; not because of what we have done, but because of who you are - speak your truth to us and may we have ears to listen.

Message:

I wonder, what do our words say about us? Our faith? Our church? Do our words hurt, or do they heal? Do they work in service to truth or to falsehood? Do our words build up, or do they tear down? Do they connect or divide? Do they reveal or cover-up? Are they full of hope or just empty promises? As a church, what are we saying to those outside our walls, to those who have been hurt by the church in the past? What do our words sound like to those who grew up in the church or those who have served the church their whole career and now things are changing? What do those who are searching for answers hear us saying? Those looking for meaning in their? Do we speak the truth in love?

These were some of the same concerns Paul had when he, from prison, wrote his letter to the Ephesians. His letter addressed a collection of ethical advice and instructions on how those who followed Jesus; who proclaimed to be a believer (the term Christian

wasn't around yet), should work together, utilize their gifts as individuals and as a whole, talk to one another, and stay connected through the Spirit of God to show unity in the body of Christ. His words challenge us to consider how we, the followers of Jesus at Grace UMC, speak the truth in love to ourselves and to others.

Read Eph. 4:11-16 MSG

Paul wrote this letter to Jews and non-Jews, two groups that were divided by so many factors it would have taken an act of God to unite them. The two groups had very different cultural backgrounds, religious histories, and faith expectations or approaches to the teachings of Jesus. Can you think of any groups today we could say the same thing about? One would think something like oh, maybe the death, burial, and resurrection of God's son Jesus would bring people together!

In the first three chapters of this letter, Paul teaches about the great measures God took in order to make these two groups into one new humanity in Jesus. Then in the last three chapters, Paul shows them how Jesus' unifying work should impact *every* relationship and aspect of their lives. When you follow Jesus, you don't get to pick and choose when, how, or with whom to be "Christian" with or to. You don't get to pick and choose who gets the truth and who doesn't.

It seems like a no-brainer - tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. It seems like it would be easy, to tell the truth, and actually, I think it is. The hard part is telling it from a place of authentic love. It is far easier to tell the truth from a place of aggression, anger, or power. And some people learn to tell the truth from a more passive place becoming masters of manipulation.

Sometimes we are led to ask the question Pontius Pilate asked: “What is truth?” Or what about those “little white lies” we tell, as to not hurt another person’s feelings? Or those half-truths we share when the person really doesn’t need all the information. Or those moments we expand or exaggerate the truth to prove a point or get our way.

We might hear ourselves or others say: I’m only human. Everybody does it. I did what I had to do. It’s only business. If I don’t do it, somebody else will. I was only following orders. Nobody’s perfect. It was for their own good. That’s what someone told me.

Telling the truth is straightforward and simple. It is the way we tell the truth that gets us in trouble. That is why Paul writes to the believers in Ephesus and reminds them they are the examples of God’s Kingdom on earth. They are to live as the Easter people they are so that when others see and hear them, they will see and hear a new way of being and doing community; a better way of living alongside one another, understanding who our neighbors are, and a better way of living for the greater purpose of Jesus.

Paul wasn’t naive. He had been around the block a time or two and he knew how people were and could be. He had seen the best and the worst in people. He didn’t expect the church to agree on everything, or that everyone would hold hands and sing peace, love, and happiness. He knew people were people; with emotions, tempers, individual ideas, life experiences, and varying expectations. He knew the believers he wrote this to were coming from very different perspectives and experiences. BUT he also knew it was critical they understand the unifying power of Jesus.

It was crucial that they understood they could not attain such unity on their own. It was not within their human ability any more than it is within ours. We cannot love like Jesus loves when left to our own devices. We are all too human. It takes a willingness

and a reliance on the presence of Jesus with us to exist from such a place of love. Paul knew it and was reiterating it to the church.

He was not telling them never to be angry. Never argue or challenge one another. Never be emotional. He was not telling them to never speak their mind or their convictions. He was not saying always compromise and give in. What he was telling them was that when disagreements, challenges, conflicting ideas, miscommunication, or anger shows up, (because it will), then talk, share, listen to understand not to debate, and work through it from a place of love, not comparison, competition, or useless criticism. Speak the truth in love.

Speak truth without belittling or beating up the people who disagree, disengage, or dispute what is being said or decided. Speak truth without punishing, persecuting, or pushing aside the people who challenge, dissect, or seek to understand the why of it all. Speak truth knowing that not everyone is going to get it, hear it, or want it AND that is o.k. Because it is God through God's Holy Spirit that works in people's hearts and lives, not you or me.

To speak the truth in love, takes work and intentionality. It takes a willingness to get out of our own way and seek the way of God - the way of Jesus. It takes courage to say what others might not like, or hear what might challenge our own understanding. It takes humility to say it in a way that is not arrogant or prideful. It takes conviction of Spirit with the understanding you might be wrong. It takes compassion to speak words of kindness even when sharing hard truths. It takes letting go of ego - of self and holding on to God - holding on to the example of Jesus.

Paul's words are a summons to righteous behavior - a challenge and calling to do better with our words; to be better with what we say and how we say it. It is a call to see both the humanity of a person and the face of Jesus at the same time - to see the humanity

and the divinity of a person because they are created in the image of God, just as you were. This text is a call to the church - the body of believers to be one in Christ; to always start there.

That doesn't mean we all act, look, think, and sound the same. It doesn't mean that we agree on everything, approach things the same, or understand things equally. It means at the core of who we are as followers of Jesus, that we seek the same truth - to live as Jesus taught us. It means at the core of who we are as followers of Jesus, we are on this long walk in the same direction together. It means at the core of who we are as followers of Jesus, we still have work to do.

That work, people of God, must again and again return to this table of communion, and flow from the love with which we are welcomed, the mercy with which we are forgiven, and the grace we are freely given. It is at this table we remember and are equipped to follow Jesus. May this table help us keep a clear perspective of truth, a willingness to be the body of Christ in the world, and the courage to speak the truth in love.

Amen

Resources Consulted:

Barclay, William. Daily Study Bible Series: the Letter to the Ephesians Revised. Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1976.

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Martin, Ralph P. Interpretation: A Bible commentary for Teaching and Preaching Ephesians. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1991.