

“Even in Love, the Truth Hurts”

Ephesians 4:11-16

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How many of you are familiar with ice breakers? They are the “get to know you” games or activities used in group building. Some people like them, others...not so much. There’s one I use regularly on retreats/conferences with adults and youth called “three truths and a lie.” It’s simple. Participants are asked to put, “three truths and one lie” on an index card. The cards are collected and then read aloud. The participants try to guess who the person is based on the statements. Once they guess who it is, then they have to guess which one is the lie. For example, a card might read; 1. Born in Nevada. 2. Loves to read. 3. Is afraid of dogs. 4. Can’t sew to save a life! Not hard to guess that this is my card. Which one is the lie? Truths and lies like these are easy but the kind of truth that Paul is talking about in this text is not.

There is one event that always comes to mind when I read our text for today...especially verse 15, “speaking the truth in love.” Years ago, on my first Sunday at another church, I was walking across the church lawn to go into worship. It was a gorgeous summer day and I was thanking God for it, when an elder came up to me and said: “Don’t you know it’s insensitive to wear perfume to church.” Well, okay, she was speaking the truth, but I didn’t experience it as very loving towards me. So I had to consider was she being loving towards those who had perfume allergies, or perhaps she had perfume allergies and she was being loving toward herself. However, I felt trapped in a catch 22. As she put the question: “Don’t you know it’s insensitive to wear perfume to church;” I was either ignorant or insensitive, and I didn’t like either of those options. I wanted to defend myself with excuses like “I forgot” or “I usually don’t wear perfume to church but I was nervous this being my first day and this perfume is comforting to me...” but I decided the best thing to do was to apologize, and thank her for her honesty. Paul’s message to the Ephesians has a similar dose of truth telling.

In these few verses, Paul affirms that God gives gifts to the community of faith “for the building up the body of Christ until all of us come to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity...to the full measure of Christ.” Sure Paul’s hearers weren’t ignorant of that message; it is consistent in Paul’s preaching. The unity of the church then struggled with the tensions of Jews and Greeks, males and females, slaves and free. For the unity of the church now we struggle with tensions of the mainline denominations and fundamentalism, gay and straight, rich and poor, to name a few. Then Paul’s honest confrontation goes on, “we must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming, but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way to him who is the head, into Christ.”

Now, Paul might be accused of being insensitive by basically telling the Ephesians that they need to “grow up”...they need to stop acting like children and come into their maturity as a body of Christ...the maturity, of course, is the unity of faith in Christ. Yes, even in love, the truth hurts! Paul, in love, was telling the Ephesians...enough is enough...grow up! Your walls of division are done...it’s time to take them down and live into your maturity, into Christ who is the Head of the church. And presumably, there is a message for us as well. A contemporary theologian has said it this way, “God loves us too much to let us stay the way we are!” Yes, even in love, the truth hurts.

As individuals, as churches, as communities and as nations, we don't want to hear that we are not all we could be...all we are called to be. So we often take the offensive position, contrary to Jesus' guidance to take the log out of our own eye before addressing the speck in our neighbors; believing we know the truth of the speck in our neighbor's eye we confront that without addressing the log in our own. It's no wonder churches get the reputation for being hypocritical! It's no wonder verse 15, "speaking the truth in love," has been misused. I have seen this verse used as a weapon of assault on individuals, churches, communities and nations. Some have taken, "speaking the truth in love," as permission for free expression of anything and everything that comes to mind...but without consideration of the "love context" the purpose, that being, unity in Christ as mature believers...the assaults can be no more than masked individual, communal, institutional or political agendas.

So what are we to do as 21st century hearers of this challenging text? First, we are to remember that the Church reflects God, the source of our unity. So the natural question is what are we reflecting? The "we" includes the Christian faith worldwide, our denomination, and Covenant. This is where we "tend the tensions" of our diversity in truth, and in love reflecting our unity or at least desire for unity in Christ who is the Head of the Christian faith, our denomination and Covenant!

Second, we embrace the gifts that God is giving us to build us up as a unified, not uniformed, but unified community of faith! Gifts that are specific and diversified. Today in our summer sermon series of celebrating our blessings, we are celebrating the gifts of our Elders and Deacons! Our Elders have served faithfully and diligently in fulfilling their calling to be spiritual leaders in the congregation. In this exciting time of discernment they have and will continue to give an unusual amount of time and energy; passion and prayer. Our Deacons are re-defining the many aspects of the ministry of compassion and hospitality here at Covenant. From Bradfield Café to sharing through the Deacons' Fund with others who are in need. But we don't stop with the celebration of our Elders and Deacons; this text from Ephesians tells that God gives gifts to equip all the saints for the work of ministry.

Equipping the saints for the work of the ministry; here at Covenant we celebrate the hundreds of gifts offered for the work of God's ministry in and through this place. Gifts that range from spiritual leadership...to ministry of compassion...to mission work in Guatemala...to financial expertise...to teaching children...to being a youth advisor...to folding bulletins...to having a green thumb! Literally hundreds of volunteers and thousands of volunteer hours every year contribute to the work of God's ministry in and through Covenant! We give thanks to God for equipping us here at Covenant to serve and we celebrate all the ways today.

It's interesting that the Greek word for "equip" can also be translated as "adjust." Choosing to use that word, the verse would read: "to adjust the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." Here is a truth in love statement, and remember, "even in love the truth can hurt;" we need to be adjusted! God has given us many amazing gifts, and we are using them, but in this exciting time of discernment we have to recognize and trust that we are being adjusted by God's grace so that our gifts for God's ministry will reflect our unity in Christ, our maturity in faith, here at Covenant, in Madison, as a part of our denomination and as members of the Christian faith around the world.

In this time of adjustment we are not to be ignorant, but informed! This can be challenging, change most always is [challenging]! But without change we are not growing toward maturity. Also, we are not to be ignorant of the facts that not everyone will get their way,

nor can we do everything that we hope and dream to do! Remember the title of the sermon, “Even in love, the truth hurts.” This next statement may hurt a bit, but I say it in love for God, and for Covenant. In this process, we are to trust God and when things don’t go our way, or our dreams are delayed, we will be encouraged to be faithful, and not “take our toys, or time, or talents or treasures, and go home!” God adjusting our Covenant community means that God is adjusting us as individuals within the community!

In addition to not being ignorant, we are also not to be insensitive. In all of this, we will be called on to speak the truth in love, remembering what love is...patient and kind, not envious, jealous or rude. Love does not insist on its own way...love bears all things, believes all things and hopes all things...love never ends! Paul was pretty harsh with the Ephesians, but his message was one out of love of God and for them. We can learn from Paul. We are to be sensitive to one another ~ speaking the truth...and listening for it in love. And realistically, it may mean, like I had to do to that elder who confronted me on that day I wore perfume, it may mean a few apologies along the way as God adjusts us for the work of ministry for the building up of the body of Christ and service in the world.

This brings us to the third thing we as 21st century hearers are to do with this challenging text. We are to use this text as a guide to serve the world. Scripture tells us again and again that the life of faith is not just about us but about the world that God loves. We examine ourselves periodically to better serve the world. As more than one theologian has said, “we have a personal faith with a public witness.” Hearing the truth that we are not yet who we are called to be, by responding to that truth in love, by going through things like a discernment process in ways that are faithful, respectful, honest, sensitive and informed, we can then take what we learn and apply it to all other aspects of our lives; everything from our familial relationships to our relationships within a global community. “Specks and logs” are not just within individuals, but also institutions! The admonition to speak the truth in love can be a guide to our helping to address the greatest concerns that face our world...wars & poverty, homelessness, health care & hunger...racism, sexism...and on and on. Done as an assault, telling the truth in love causes even more divisions; done in the context of love witnessing to our unity and maturity in Christ, it builds bridges and opens doors of possibilities to healing and wholeness. Even in love, the truth hurts...but remember God loves us and the world too much to let us stay the way we are!

A month from now, all members and friends of Covenant will be invited to contribute to the conversation of discerning God’s future here at Covenant. At those Covenant conversations, we won’t have time for an ice breaker like “three truths and a lie” but confident that we are all being adjusted, equipped for the work of God’s ministry, locally and globally, we can affirm three truths of God, 1. God loves us, 2. God is gracious and 3. God is guiding us; discarding any lie that causes doubt that we are faithfully trusting and celebrating what has been and welcoming what is to come, witnessing to God through our unity and maturity in Christ! Amen!