

## The Language of Love

### [Ephesians 4:1-16](#)

Rev. Douglas Learned

Sunday, November 5, 2006

Communion Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray: Lord, you are good to us, that we can come together today to worship you in song and music, in word read and word proclaimed. As we open your word today, help us take that word into our hearts and minds, that we will not only speak your word to the world, but live it. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

I have a letter, written to me by my grandfather when I was eight years old, that I like to pull out of my files periodically to remember the imagination of my childhood. My grandparents had a 130- pound black Labrador retriever named Snoopy. Snoopy was a great, big goof of a dog who captured my boyish attention, and my grandfather knew this about me. In his letter to me, he describes in fine detail Snoopy's great disdain for the squirrels that gather in the upper branches of the trees in the backyard to mock and taunt him. The squirrels have no respect for Snoopy, he records in his letter to me, and Snoopy's frustrated by that fact.

My grandfather also weaves in a paragraph mentioning how, after a warm summer rain, the birds swoop down from the trees to search for and pull from the loose, wet ground earthworms—like manna—for the taking. When he describes that scene from his front yard, I can hear the birds singing in my imagination, and I can smell that damp soil. I can imagine the morning sun beginning to burn up those little droplets of water from the grass and turning it to a mist.

It's part of the magic of letters delivered the old-fashioned way. There's something special about knowing that he shaped those very words on that paper with his pen in hand, and he folded that very sheet into the envelope to send to me: a wrapped gift for a little boy.

In this age of instant communication through e-mail, cell phones, faxes, and worldwide overnight deliveries, it's important to remember when we read from scripture, the care and deliberate attention Paul the Apostle gave to composing his letters to congregations of believers who were young in the faith. What he wrote in these letters had to stand the test of time. And so he took the time to form his words with care and composed the letters with love in his heart for those who would receive them.

I had a professor in seminary who taught extensively on the subject of Paul's epistles, and he said the key to understanding Paul's theology was to think of his writings as love letters to the church. When you read or listen to a love letter read aloud, you aren't listening for doctrine so much as you are listening for what is written between the lines. You're listening for the heart of the writer's expression to you.

With no backspace button in his day, Paul chose his language carefully when addressing the saints of the church. He begins this section of his letter to the Ephesians with a plea, the kind of plea you make to someone you care for deeply:

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift."

"The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the

full stature of Christ. 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 into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I'll never forget when I began the ordination process, now 16 years ago. One of the elders on the session of the church in Ann Arbor, Michigan, when examining me, inquired of my interest in pastoral ministry. "Doug," he said, "tell me one thing that you do not like about the church."

I thought for a moment and then responded, "Church politics." To which he replied, without missing beat, "If you don't like church politics, why are you going into pastoral ministry?" I often marvel at God's sense of humor. Now I serve not only in a church, but in a church in the heart of the world's politics!

What I've come to realize over a few years of practicing ministry is that church politics are not to be avoided. No—as hard as church politics can be at times, they're worthy of an embrace. Because God is in the midst of the people, and wherever you have people, you have what? Politics. And I want to be where God is.

I want to witness when God does something in church politics... through church politics... in spite of church politics...whatever. As the pop song puts it, "I want to know what love is" and learn how it is that God works through our great desires and passions to serve him through the witness of the church.

I think people are drawn to this town, in part, because they are drawn to the idea that this is the place where people of various priorities and opinions come to work it out. Some days are better than others. The irony that I am delivering a sermon on Paul's idea that we should "speak the truth in love," two days before the elections, is not lost on me. But our elections, and indeed this town, are where our citizens come to express what it means to be an American.

The church is the place where we come to speak and to listen; to learn; and to love; the place where we come to lead a life worthy of our calling. Then we go out from the church to share that love of Christ with the world. The church is where we learn to love each other. It's a wonderful mix of varying ideas about how to love Jesus. And in order to give witness to that love of Jesus, we are called—and perhaps compelled—to love each other. Thanks be to God.

In verse 15, Paul says, "We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." So much of growing up in Christ, maturing in Christ, is taking the time and making the time to work through our differences by speaking the truth in love.

This is one of those 'both/and'— not 'either/or'— statements. Paul is not saying we need to either speak the truth OR love each other. He's insisting we do both at the same time. And this is precisely the work we're engaged in here at NPC every day of the week. It's kind of a spiritual acrobatics Paul is insisting on here: both speaking the truth, AND showing Christian love—at the same time!

When you were a child, did you ever play one of those games where you tried to challenge each to do more than one thing at the same time? Do you remember patting your head and rubbing your tummy? Recently, my five-year-old son Peter and I have been working on a new combination. We've been working on wiggling our ears (you can't see it, but I'm doing it right now), moving our eyebrows up and down, flaring our nostrils (you just have to trust me on that one), and whistling— all at the same time, no hands. This, more than any other thing, has convinced my son that he has the coolest dad that ever lived. Now I realize that you might be trying right now to get that image either in your head or out of your head.

The point is this, speaking the truth to someone, especially if it is a difficult truth, while still showing love for them in Christ is a challenging task, a spiritual juggling act. But it's what Paul's urging, if not begging us to do: "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called." Not just telling someone the truth, no matter how much it hurts them--they need to hear it. But doing so with humility, gentleness, with the recognition that we're all trying to get this thing called life right. I once had a youth director, who

worked under my supervision, speak the truth in love to me about how I composed my e-mail messages. “Doug, I know,” she said, sitting across from me in my office, “you’re a really busy guy. But I’d like to suggest that maybe you should open your e-mail messages with a greeting, before you jump off into your topic. You’re coming across a little cold,” she said, with a little fear and trembling in her voice, “but that’s not how I experience you in person.” Didn’t she put that nicely?

Those few words from a sister in Christ who took a career risk in confronting me, her supervisor, with a problem I had with communication, changed the way I compose most of my messages today. Although I have to admit that even as I say that, I can think of two or three examples of how I’ve failed to live up to that standard within the last month. We’re works in progress, Amen?

When I think of speaking the truth in love to the church body, I remember a time when I was young and my mother, who was a social worker, was asked by the pastor of our church to give an update on a family from the country of Laos. The church had rescued this family from trouble and moved them to our community four years earlier, as part of a mission project. The move to the States had been a successful one except for one thing, this family that the church had gone to such great lengths to bring to the U.S. was no longer attending our church for worship.

I can picture my mother standing at the pulpit that morning; she spoke for ten minutes about how involved our members had been with this family for the first few months after their arrival. But after that they kind of dropped off the church’s radar. Not surprisingly, the family didn’t fit into the culture of a midwestern American town right away, and the church had, without intending it, just run out of ideas.

What I remember most about that moment was how hard it was for my mother to both speak the truth to the church about this matter, and to speak it in love, without pointing the finger. This congregation had embraced my mother at a vulnerable time in her life, and it was difficult for her to lift up this challenge for the church to consider. But she did it with great love for the Laotian family and for her brothers and sisters in Christ, who had welcomed her into the life of the church when she had been a stranger.

I remember, years later walking down the aisle of that church at my mother’s funeral service and seeing fifteen Laotian family members taking up an entire pew, making their physical presence known to our family, and to the church, as a sign of love.

Today is Communion of Saints Sunday: a time when we acknowledge the fact that we, who sit here today, are in the minority membership of the Church. The greater number of the Church’s members have preceded us on this earth; and today we celebrate their witness for Christ. If all those generations of Christians had not stuck it out with each other, celebrating their lives as captives to the glorious truth of the Gospel, we would not be here today.

Speaking the truth in love is about allowing God to shape our hearts, to shape our minds, and, indeed, to shape our body into an instrument of understanding, compassion, and care for each other.

This past Thursday afternoon, I stopped in a Greek diner in Potomac to grab a quick bite to eat—a salad, a personal pizza with artichokes, and a Diet Coke to wash it down. I was struggling to formulate this sermon in my mind, and in the past I’ve found pizza with artichokes helps writer’s block in preachers. As I sat down at the counter, I thought in prayer, “Lord, it’s Thursday afternoon. You’ve got to help me here.” Just then, a kind woman appeared right next to me at the counter. She sat down and ordered a grilled cheese sandwich with tomatoes. And for some divine reason, she just started talking to me. I love it when people do that -- just start talking to you. There’s always a formality when you’re in public, and I’m always amazed when people break through that.

“I don’t have much time,” she remarked, “I’m on my way downtown. I give art tours to blind children at the American Museum of Art.”

“Okay, Lord,” I said to myself, “I’m listening.” And then she began to talk about art -- she even started talking a little bit about biblical art, which, many of you know, is a great interest of mine.

She then told me about a time when she gave a talk to blind children in the presence of a sculpture of Hagar, the servant to Sarah and Abraham, and the mother of Ishmael from the book of Genesis. She described the sculpture to the children: about the position of Hagar's hands and feet, and the expression on Hagar's face. She was trying to convey the truth of this sculpture in words. And after she finished talking, she invited the children to touch the sculpture with their hands, so that they could "see" it by touch.

But one girl in the group was not satisfied by the experience, saying, "I can't see Hagar. I don't understand what you're saying." My friend tried again with more words, but the girl wasn't getting it. "I know," said the girl, "just put me in Hagar's position."

And my friend did just that -- taking into hand the girl's arms, legs, and torso (I learned later in the conversation that this woman is herself a sculptress), and placed the girl's body into the position of Hagar in the sculpture. Having been formed to the shape of Hagar, the girl exclaimed, "Oh, now I see her. Now I understand."

As we mature in Christ we begin to see what cannot be seen...through faith. By making ourselves vulnerable to each other, and allowing our lives to be shaped by one another, we do even more than speak of God's love. We embody God's love.

When we put Paul's words into practice, allowing our body to be placed, shaped, and molded into Christ's service, we discover what love is. In verse 15, Paul writes: "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

By God's patience and grace, we are shaped to speak and to embody the language of love, the language of the Gospel.

Let us pray. Lord, equip us to live the life that Paul envisioned for us, by the power of your Spirit. Give us humility, gentleness, and patience with each other, especially when we feel certain that we are in the right. Shape our thoughts and actions for the building up of this, your body, your Church. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.