

Speaking the Truth in Love

[Ephesians 4:1-4, 4:14-16](#)

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There is not a person in church today who would say that relationships are unimportant. Nor is there a person in church today who would say that relationships are easy. Maybe the hardest part of relationships is learning how to speak the truth in love.

Why is it hard to speak the truth to the people we love the most? Anyone who thinks that it's always easy to tell the truth to friends and family members, doesn't have any friends or family. The more you really love someone, ironically the more complicated it becomes to tell them the truth. Why is that?

One reason is that we don't want to hurt the people we love. Being afraid that what we want to say will be hurtful, we feel caught in a bind -- a terrible bind that pits love against the truth. A second reason why it is hard to speak the truth to the people we love is that we assume familiarity mitigates objectivity. If the truth is hard to hear, the people you love may assume you are so close to the artwork of their life that you can only see the scratches. So they tell you to "back off," which is another way of saying step back and you'll see the art better. Even if the truth is really good news, it's still hard for your loved ones to hear it from you. Tell your child, "Honey I think you are so smart, and so beautiful and so gifted." and the child may enjoy hearing it, but will discount the information, because it's your job to say stuff like that.

A third reason why it is hard to speak the truth to the people we love is that sometimes we don't really know what the truth is. Often my wife will ask my opinion on her new dress or a new bedspread. And I'll say "I dunno." She thinks I don't want to tell her my opinion. That I'm in anguish trying to figure out how to tell her that I hate it. But when I dig all the way to the bottom of my soul there is simply no opinion about the bedspread. Which I now know is worse than having the wrong opinion. More significantly, when it comes to questions that are very important in a relationship, we often don't know the truth. How do you make a hard choice that may cause an argument? How do you get a relationship unstuck? How do you get over a huge hurt you have created? We don't know the true response to these questions. Or maybe we aren't even sure that there is a truth. As we slug our way through the arguments in a relationship, we hear about my truth, your truth, the therapist's truth, and all that we have to show for it is a lot of confusion and hurt. Then, like Pontius Pilate, we ask "Truth? What is truth?" Pilate was trying to govern a people who were being torn apart by conflicting claims of truth. The Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes all had conflicting theological truths. The Romans, Herodians, and Zealots all had conflicting political truths. And the way Pilate saw things, none of these claims were making anyone more civil, let alone loving.

In our own society we also get tired of the shouting about pluralisms and diversity. We are tempted just to jettison the whole notion of the truth, because we think that's the only way we'll ever "just get along." Couples who get tired of working on their issues are tempted to ask, "Do we have to keep dealing with these problems? Can't we just love each other?" Denominations, like the Presbyterian Church (USA), that get tired of debating the application of biblical texts to current social issues are tempted to ask, "Isn't all this theology just dividing us?"

But a society, church, family, or even a friendship, can only agree to disagree so long. At some point love has to be grounded in a common truth or the love will blow away. What is truth? It is a critical question at the basis of any committed or loving relationship. Because without a common understanding of common truth, the love cannot last.

Although he couldn't see it, Pilate was asking that question to the embodiment of truth and love - Jesus Christ. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus is also the incarnation of God's pure love among us. So in Jesus Christ, love and truth hold together. As Jesus demonstrated, love without truth isn't loving, and recklessly pursuing the truth without love is to pursue something other than the truth.

The Apostle Paul is claiming the same thing in our text today. "Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." So then, for those of us who place Jesus Christ at the head of all our commitments and relationships, there is great help in knowing how to speak the truth in love.

As Jesus demonstrated, to speak the truth in love means that we speak it humbly. Before Paul gets to his point about speaking the truth, he has already told us to "live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Then he defines our calling: "with all humility and gentleness, with patience bear with one another in love." So there it is - to speak the truth in love is to speak it humbly.

Presbytery is the regional governing body for Presbyterian congregations. Last Tuesday before our presbytery launched into a difficult debate, the presbytery executive Dr. Teri Thomas reminded us, "It is always easier to believe God can change someone else's mind than it is to believe God can change our own minds." Right.

To speak the truth with humility means that your primary concern cannot be to convince others of your truth, but to pursue the truthfulness of your truth. Ultimately, your calling in a relationship isn't to prevail in an argument, but to present yourself with the humility, gentleness, and patience of Jesus Christ.

Have you ever noticed that Jesus got into a lot of conflict, but never an argument? He simply spoke the truth and then had the humility to leave the truth alone. When Jesus was speaking the truth to power, he simply said, "There is no power except that which has been given by God." When he was speaking the truth to the rich, he simply said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God." When he was speaking the truth to the righteous, he simply said, "The Son of Man has come to seek out and save the lost." But Jesus never uses a second sentence in these conversations. He just states the truth and lets it hang in the air. That's because he has the humility not to try to convince people, and because he believes the truth is powerful enough to do its own convincing.

In a relationship in which you are trying to speak the truth, it's always the second paragraph that gets you in trouble, isn't it? That's when you move from telling the truth to selling, or pushing the truth. But the truth doesn't need help! This is so liberating. All you are called to do is to speak it. Once it's out there, the Holy Spirit will take over, determining if it ought to be heard.

Now this doesn't mean that you can simply zing your loved ones with a one-liner and take off. Remember, your calling is to speak in love and with humility and gentleness -- with patience bear with one another in love. So the truth can only be spoken in a committed relationship that says, "I'm not going anywhere." The disciples frequently didn't understand what Jesus was saying, but because he stayed with them, so did the truth of his words.

None of the truth that Jesus spoke was more humble or loving than his last words, when he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Not knowing what we are doing, we often hurt the people we love the most. That places a burden on the person who was hurt to decide how to speak about the truth of the hurt, and how to forgive out of love. This may be where speaking the truth in love is most difficult, and most critical.

In a book titled, "Speak Truth to Power," Bishop Desmond Tutu has an essay in which he has written eloquently about the responsibility of blacks and coloreds for the souls of the whites in South Africa. Through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which he was appointed to lead, Bishop Tutu said they have discovered not only the depth of the atrocities that occurred under apartheid, but also the power of the victims over those who committed the atrocities. That is the power and the obligation, to first speak the truth and then to forgive. For it is in forgiving that the victim becomes no longer a victim and exercises the power to create a new beginning in the life of an offender.

To illustrate this, Bishop Tutu told the amazing story of the day his Commission was investigating army officers who gave orders for their soldiers to open fire on a demonstration being sponsored by the African

National Congress. The hearing room was filled with the families of those who had been killed by this atrocity. The four officers came before the Commission, one white and three black. After the charges were read, the white officer said, "We gave the orders for the soldiers to use their guns." The tension in the room was so palpable it could be cut with a knife. Then the white officer turned to the families and said, "Please forgive us. And please receive these, my colleagues back into your community." With this confession, the families slowly stood to their feet and began applauding until the sound was deafening. Then the Bishop got everyone's attention in the room and said, "Let us keep quiet, because we are in the presence of something holy." At that moment, in that room, sinners were being forgiven and their lives were being recreated.

That is the power of you speaking the truth, humbly, in love. That is its purpose - to forgive and to create the sacred moment for new beginnings. Anything less is neither loving, nor truthful to the grace of God.

Our Father in heaven, by your Holy Spirit draw us first to the truth and love of your Son, our Savior, that we may share in his gracious ministry of creating new beginnings with truth and love. Amen.