

Speaking the Truth in Love
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Ephesians 4:1-16

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

7 But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

8 Therefore it is said,

“When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;
he gave gifts to his people.”

9 (When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

11 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 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.

14 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.

15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 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.

A LIFE WORTHY OF OUR CALLING

I saw a provocative sign in front of a church.
The sign read, "God likes nice atheists better than mean Christians."

I bet that sign drew some input from the community!

But, that thought does have some backing from Scripture.
For example, Jesus once told religious leaders who talked the talk of faith but didn't walk the walk,

"The cheats and the prostitutes are going to heaven before you make it."
(Matthew 21:31)

Faith is not just believing the right thing about God.
Faith is also walking the walk.
We must do what faith requires.

As I said last week, more often than not we must act our way into believing instead of the other way around.

Paul put it this way in his letter to the conflicted church at Ephesus.

He told them to "lead a life worth of their calling."

PATIENCE

And then the Apostle describes what it means to live like a Christian in a very practical, down to earth way.

It means to be humble, gentle, and patient.
Christians who walk the walk bear with one another in love.

And, of course, Jesus is our example.

Jesus was a servant to all.
He met hostility with gentleness and self sacrifice.
He was the Son of God, but he gave all that up in order to make God's presence a lived human reality.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul suggested that we should follow the pattern of Christ.
Our attitude toward others should be informed by Jesus' example of humility. (Philippians 2:1-8)

And this means above all to be patient with each other.

As James put it in his letter, we should be
"quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." (James 1:19)

Now don't misunderstand.

There will be times when we need to speak up and speak out or even on rare occasions we might need to become angry over injustice in the world.

But, in most situations our first choice should be to bear with people in love.

We should make a conscious effort to back off and calm down.

This kind of love does not come naturally.
It must be practiced over and over again.
I don't know about you, but even with the people I love the most; sometimes I am not so patient.

Patience does not come easily.
But, the rewards of patience are great.

I think we underestimate the power of patience.
Patience is not just a virtue; it is a gift of the Spirit

If we are gentle and bear with people during times of great stress, it lowers the level of conflict just enough that a word of hope can be spoken.

On the other hand, the gospel of peace cannot be heard in a community consumed by conflict.

The working of the Spirit cannot be perceived when our hearts are filled with anger and fear.

But when we are patient, when we bear with one another in love, it is amazing what God can do through us.

It is amazing how what seemingly insurmountable problems can be solved.

UNITED BY GRACE

What can we do to live a life worthy of our calling?
What can motivate us to be patient in an impatient world?
Paul suggests that we think about what we have in common.

What we have in common is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all who is above all, and through all, and in all.”

What binds us together is something ... or to be precise someone ... greater than ourselves. The trouble with many of our efforts at unity is that those efforts are based upon sentimentality. I like you because you agree with me. I like you because you are like me.

But, in the church we are united by a common Savior.

The One who unites us is us are greater than all those things that would divide us.

The grace of God as revealed in Christ Jesus is the glue that holds us together.

And if we really understand God’s grace, we will strive to be a gracious people.
We cannot preach a gospel of forgiveness when we do not forgive others.

We say in the Lord’s Prayer each week,
“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

But, we need to do more than say it.
We need to practice it.

This is what it means to live a life that is worthy of our calling. It is a life in which forgiveness and forbearance take precedence.

This sounds simple, and it is.
But, it is not easy.

DIVERSITY: A PROBLEM AND A GIFT

There are many reasons that the Christian community has to struggle to live a life worthy of her calling.

And the biggest reason we struggle is that we are a diverse community.

We have many different viewpoints and come from many different backgrounds. And this inevitably leads to misunderstanding and sometimes conflict.

Diversity is nothing new in the church.
The church has been diverse from the very beginning.
Indeed, a diverse church was God's plan.
It was God's way of bringing salvation to the world.

In his ministry on earth Jesus called people from all walks of life to be his disciples.

He was often criticized for eating with the wrong kind of people, people like tax collectors and sinners.

How could he be a prophet they asked if he accepted everyone equally?

But, the heavenly kingdom that Jesus proclaimed was for all people. And it is still for all people.

Jesus still calls all kinds of people to be his disciples.
The church should be the most diverse institution on earth because God calls people from the East and West, the North and South to sit at table in his kingdom.

This was true for the church at Ephesus.

The dividing wall between Jew and Greek had been torn down by the power of the gospel.
Amazingly the Holy Spirit had descended upon Jew and Gentile alike.

And both groups were a part of that church.

But, old prejudices die hard.
They still struggled to be who they were called to be.

How could such a motley crew work together for the kingdom of God?
How could they learn to live in peace together when their customs and experiences were so different?

Actually, that's not a bad question to ask of us.
We are all different ages and come from different backgrounds and cultures.

How can we be patient with each other in our differences?
How can we come together for the sake of God's kingdom?

We might begin by recognizing that our differences, our diversity can be a strength.

In this passage Paul is trying to unify the church at Ephesus. But, Paul recognized that they will not be unified by embracing a dull uniformity.

They will be unified by recognizing that their diversity is a gift from God.

God has given all of us unique spiritual gifts.
And the most important thing is not just knowing and celebrating what our gifts might be.

(And that is important.)

The most important thing is using our gifts to build up the body of Christ.

We help each other mature in the faith.
We use our gifts to encourage each other and help each other in our weak moments.

And heaven knows that we all have weak moments, more than one!

But, the grace of God lived out in the community of faith will help us become what we are called to be, the body of Christ.

When I preach on these passages that emphasize the body of Christ.

I like to remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:27, “Now you are the body of Christ and each of you is a member of it.”

In other words, everyone is needed in the church, but no one is self sufficient.

We are all a part of the body of Christ, but we are just a part.

We need each other in order to grow up to the image of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

We’ve already said that this involves being patient and forbearing in love.

But, it requires more than that.

Paul said that in order for the church to lead a life worthy of her calling, she must also “speak the truth in love.”

That’s where we often misrepresent the gospel.

That’s where we get into what a friend of mind calls “sloppy agape.”

He used that phrase to say that sometimes we represent the love of God in an inaccurate way.

If we get sloppy with our theology, we do not tell the truth about God. And if we do not tell the truth about God we do not fulfill our primary purpose as the people of God.

Paul wrote in his second letter to Timothy that he should work hard to get his theology right, so that he could “rightly explain the word of truth”.

In the Bible, the gospel is often referred to as the “word of truth.” So, love does not mean anything goes.

Love is action.

But, love is also truth.

Love is a way of living that is in harmony with the gospel.

If we do not anchor our lives in the truth of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, the Apostle tells us we are like “children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.” (4:14)

Every day I hear charlatans say the craziest things and suggest that these crazy ideas are the gospel.

And people listen and follow these charlatans. Some are very popular

Why? When our lives are not anchored in the truth of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, we are easy prey for these wolves in sheep’s clothing.

It is not loving to allow people to be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. If we are to be loving, we must rightly explain the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Yes, we are called to be patient with each other.

Yes, we are called to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.

Yes, we are called to consider diversity to be a gift from God and not a problem.

But, that does not mean that we should compromise when it comes to God’s truth.

That’s where I take issue with the church sign that said, “God likes nice atheists better than mean Christians.”

It seems to suggest that being nice is the highest value.

It’s not.

The highest value is love.

And sometimes love requires us to say difficult things to others.

Remember what our parents taught us? If you can't say something nice don't say anything at all. But, that advice doesn't always work. In the face of conflict sometimes the loving thing to do is to speak the truth.

When you look at the ministry of Christ you see a person who loved others so much that he was willing to confront them when they were wrong. And Paul tells the Ephesians that they should reflect this Christ like willingness to tell the truth in love.

Ironically, sometimes peacemaking is not a very peaceful process. Sometimes we are called to confront injustice and prejudice. And that process can be very difficult.

Indeed, as we said last week, this is what the letter to the Ephesians is all about. There was some sort of conflict between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in the church at Ephesus.

And in his letter Paul confronted the church on this point.

He pointed out that their behavior was not Christian. And he challenged them to change, to live a life worthy of their calling. He was challenged them to walk the walk instead of just talking the talk.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a good example of what it means to speak the truth in love.

You might have noticed that the Apostle spends little time talking about the specific problem that caused the conflict in the church.

In fact, we're not even sure what the conflict is all about.

But, he does spend considerable time correcting their theology.

He reminds them that God does not build walls of division. God tears down walls.

He reminds them that Christians are not individuals who do their own thing and lobby for their own point of view.

Instead, Christians are the body of Christ.
We use our various gifts to build one another up.
We are all needed, but none of us are self-sufficient.

That's telling the truth in love.

SAY IT SOFTLY

William Sloane Coffin said that a student once pulled him aside and said,
"Can I give you a piece of advice?"

And Coffin said, "Sure."

And the student said,
"When you tell someone something that is difficult to hear. Say it softly."

I think that's good advice.

We are called to speak God's truth, but we cannot speak it in such a way
that the message of grace is distorted. There is no such thing as a mean
Christian.

When you are forced to speak a hard truth, say it softly. Say it as one who
is also under the judgment of that difficult truth.

Sometimes Christians do express the message in a harsh way. And when
they do, it comes across more as a message of judgment instead of a mes-
sage of grace.

And all of us need to guard against doing this.

There's a difference between speaking the truth in love, and using the Bible
as a way to attack and exclude others. That's the difference between be-
ing a mean Christian and a messenger of grace.

Perhaps it would help if we could remember that the goal of the gospel is
always to bring us together. The goal of the gospel is to tear down walls in-
stead of building them. The goal of the gospel is to become more like
Christ in the way we treat others.

This is how we define maturity in the church.
And it is always a work in progress.

Sometimes I think we might fail more than we succeed.
But, we do not quit trying.

We do not quit striving to be all that we are called to be in Christ Jesus.
We do not quit trying to live a life worthy of our calling in Christ Jesus.

GOING THE WRONG WAY

In the movie “Planes, Trains and Automobiles” there’s a scene in which Steve Martin and John Candy inadvertently drive their car onto the interstate going against the flow of traffic.

Motorists on the other side of the highway try to warn them by yelling, “You’re going the wrong way.”

And John Candy’s character turns to Martin and laughs them off saying, “They’re drunk. How do they know where we’re going?”

Candy’s problem was that he got confused at the very beginning of his journey.

He got on the interstate the wrong way which made him a danger to himself and others. He would never reach his destination going the wrong way.

He needed someone to tell him the truth in a way that he could hear it.

And that’s what Paul was trying to do for the Ephesians. They were going the wrong way.

They were called to become more like Christ every day. But, they would never reach their destination if they continued to fight and feud among themselves.

I wonder.
Are we going the wrong way?

The way of God is the way of gentleness, humility and patience.
When we go some other way our unity breaks down, and we lose our way.

So let us learn to speak the truth in love.
Let us gently turn around brothers and sisters who have entered the road
on the wrong ramp.

And let us accept the word of truth spoken to us with grace and accep-
tance.

Let us encourage and build one another up so that we may who we are
called to be, the body of Christ, a sign of God's love in the world.

Amen.