

Speaking the Truth in Love

Ephesians 4:11-16

September 11, 2022

A month ago, as has become our annual tradition, the staff and elders of our congregation gathered for a one-day retreat. Our purpose was to connect more deeply with one another, to pray about the year ahead in the life of our church, and to reflect and dream a bit on God's call to Second Presbyterian Church in this moment of our life together.

For the fourth and final year, the focus of our retreat was the passage you just heard from the fourth chapter of the letter to the Ephesians. Over the years, the words themselves have become quite familiar to us. And yet I continue to be impressed and even surprised each year by their freshness, by the relevance of Paul's message, first written to a fledgling Christian community in the ancient Greek city of Ephesus. One of the things I love about the Apostle Paul is that he wrote practical instructions for faithful living that are deeply rooted in an understanding of who God is and what God has done through Jesus Christ. The theology, the depth, is there, but the instructions, the commands, the advice, the wisdom, the guidance, are excruciatingly practical. Paul addresses the real-life circumstances of the Church in a way that calls believers and communities to embody the virtues they have received and seen in Jesus. In chapter five, Paul calls the Ephesian Christians to "be imitators of God... Walk in love, as Christ loved us..." Of course, imitating God or loving like Christ loves us has never been an easy demand—not then and not now. You might say that it requires growth.

When I was a seminary student, in the mid-2000s, schools like the one I attended were launching centers, programs, curricula, and certificates in Evangelism and Church Growth. That was the

buzz phrase of the time—Evangelism and Church Growth. It turns out that leaders across the country had looked at the statistics and demographics of mainline congregations in the United States and determined that people like me needed courses on how to reverse the trend and grow the church. Those courses, that instruction, often revolved around techniques and tactics. Which programs and events are most likely to attract newcomers? How do you properly welcome guests to worship? What does a relevant and stirring sermon look like in the Twenty-First Century? How do we adapt our worship to the interests of potential worshipers not yet here? I remember when a friend of mine invited the staff from Disney World to come and train his team on creating a culture of hospitality. Who can argue with Disney's culture of hospitality? The intention of these certificate programs, these courses, these workshops, these retreats, was admirable, I think, and some were successful in accomplishing the goal of numeric growth. Some churches did grow. But the trajectory of the mainline denominations was not meaningfully altered, and many pastors and church leaders grew increasingly frustrated and disillusioned.

This dynamic was in my mind as I read our passage yet one more time, preparing to preach a fourth kickoff sermon for another program year at Second Presbyterian Church. I noticed that the Apostle Paul commends and commands growth. But we should pay close attention to the *kind* of growth. Paul speaks of building up the Body of Christ through unity. He writes of maturing to the measure of Christ's stature, of growing *up* as followers of Jesus and growing *out in love* for God and one another.

Please note that Paul does not once, at any point, refer to the growth of the church in terms of its numbers of worshipers, participants, converts, or adherents. And do you know what happened in Ephesus? Well, I'll tell you what happened in Ephesus. In the Book of Acts, we read that the church "grew mightily and prevailed" against all opposition and persecution.

So, here is my intentionally provocative conclusion:

God does not need church growth; God needs grown-up churches.

Paul speaks of growth in two ways. The first is a kind of spiritual growth exemplified by his emphasis on maturity. Paul says we must grow up. The second is that growth that connects us to one another. We must grow in love.

This year we are devoting both intention and attention to the most challenging command contained in these verses. Speaking the truth in love. Speak (a verb). The truth (a noun). In love (a descriptor). These words, taken together, are deceptively simple, but if you have ever tried to live them in your personal or congregational life, you know how profoundly difficult they are. And if you are paying any attention at all to the world in which we live, you know how urgently important they are.

Paul knew that the act of truth-telling in a spirit of love would stretch disciples of Jesus, and so he makes the command in the context of growth. That is, speaking the truth in love is the mark of a mature Christian, a grown-up church. *And*, we are grown by the act of speaking and listening for the truth from a place of genuine love.

My friend Tom Long has devoted his entire professional life to shaping preachers and churches. Recently in a conversation, he made the observation that you can walk across the landscape of much contemporary Christian discourse without getting your ankles wet.

What we lack are places of depth. Deep engagement with the living Word of scripture. Deep relationships with one another. Deep dives into the places where God has called us. Friends, we are suffering. We are suffering from pseudo-theologies that skim scripture in search of validation for pre-formed prejudice. Yes, we are. Let's be honest about that. As the columnist Michael Gerson wrote just last week, we "must take seriously a sobering development in America's common life. Many who identify with Jesus most loudly and publicly are doing the most to discredit his cause." Shame on the church for allowing a message of amazing grace to be co-opted by causes that amount to little more than power-grabbing and hypocritical exclusion. It is time for grown-up churches to offer a response to this heretical twisting of the liberating truth of the gospel. And just imagine if such a response could begin right here among us.

Imagine if we spoke the truth in love. We might start by confessing that every single part of this command is challenging for us.

Speaking. We are called to speak. Sometimes, we do not speak. Silence in the face of suffering and injustice is too often a failing of the Church. From the time of the prophets, like Zechariah whose warning we heard this morning, to the teachings of Jesus himself, we have been called as a people to speak up and speak out. Friends, when our literal neighbors lack enough food to eat, or a safe place to live, or the dignity of meaningful work, we must not be silent. When the pursuit of a naked political power animates the agenda of our leaders more than their concern for the common good, the Church must raise its voice. We are called to speak, trusting that God will give us the words to meet the moment.

We are called to speak *the truth*. Sometimes, we do not speak the truth. Earlier in the letter, Paul refers to the word of truth as "the gospel of salvation." In other words, the call to speak the truth is a command to bear witness, to give testimony to God's saving work in your life. We must confess that we have

sometimes been timid or reserved in ways that do not serve God's purpose. We live in a world that is starving for truth, truth we have to tell. The truth that there is meaning beyond the monotony of life. The truth that there is a far better way than the increasingly bitter and divisive path we're traveling. The truth that there is a joy of life to be found in committing our lives to following Jesus. It is time for our church to testify to the truth of God's radical love, God's embracing grace.

And, yes, we are called to speak the truth *in love*. Sometimes, we fail to speak the truth in love. The witness of the Church has been damaged, depleted, by voices who spew hatred and call it gospel. It is not gospel. The strength of our common ministry has been diminished by those who would wield the word of life as a weapon of judgment. God's word is *not* a weapon. What we are speaking cannot be the truth if it is spoken without love. For God is love. God's love casts out fear. And so, you and I must resist any message that claims to be the truth when it is conveyed in ways that only evoke fear. Divisive rhetoric may have grown some churches bigger, but listen—fear has not once built the community of faith up in love. Not once.

It's time to grow up.

When our son Samuel was in pre-K down here at Children's Circle Preschool, one of his wise teachers said something that has stayed with me. We were discussing the importance of reading to children in order to develop their own reading skills, and she explained to us that *learning* to read is really a byproduct of *loving* to read. That is, if a child links the act of reading with the warm feelings of time spent with family, or with stories that captivate the heart and the mind, that child is much more likely to develop both the skill and the habit of reading.

Yes, I want to see Second Presbyterian Church grow numerically this year. We have a message that needs to be heard, a witness that needs to be shared, a community that so many are longing to experience. But church growth is like reading. Growing our

church will be a byproduct of growing up and growing together in love. The witness of a church on fire with the Spirit is all we need to be a place that draws others in. Enough with tactics and schemes devoid of deep meaning. Enough with tortured readings of scripture twisted to buttress political ambition or fuel fanatical fear. Enough with weak-kneed timidity of disciples who fail to speak as the gospel we love is debased, degraded, and desecrated. Together, we can say *enough*.

So, here is my pastoral guidance for the year ahead, drawn from Paul's command to another congregation seeking a faithful way forward in a complex and sometimes hostile world. This year, find a place of depth where you can grow. Commit to a Sunday morning class and bring your children. Join a small group or a Bible study. Commit yourself to worship weekly as an act of spiritual growth. And, this year, find a place where you can grow in love. Give your time to one of the ministries of the church or find another place in our city where what you have to offer is needed. Reach out to someone who is lonely or isolated. Set some time aside for the purpose of growing deeper in love.

Speaking God's truth requires that we grow. Deeper in our love for Christ. Stronger in our love for one another. Fiercer in our love for the city where God has placed us. So, friends at Second Church: this year, let's commit ourselves to church growth. Amen.