

Spotlight on the Early Church: Speaking the Truth in Love
Psalm 51; Ephesians 4:1-16
By Pastor Peter Blank
August 4, 2024

In this preaching series we are continuing, we have been spot lighting the early church and the challenges that it faced as it expanded and aged. This week we focus on speaking the truth in love.

Let me begin by saying that I want to speak about truth: I went to summer school. I had to go to summer school in order to graduate with my high school class! Each spring, when the school year was winding down, my teachers would hold it over my head; “Peter, if you don’t buckle down and finish this stuff, you’re going to have to go to summer school.” I was not a motivated student and I fell behind! Summer School was a fate worse than death; having to get up early, and spend my summer mornings in a stuffy classroom, instead of playing ball and riding bikes and goofing off. But I spent one summer in classes - summer school.

In summer school, they just taught the basics: there was no music or art electives, no advanced placement courses. There was English 101, and bonehead math, and basic science class, and PE (probably for the kids who actually wanted to be in summer school!). It was no frills education; the stuff that was essential to know in order to move on to the next year of school.

You know I wonder if the church shouldn’t offer summer school; basic education in the essentials of our faith journey. Courses like “Bonehead bible” and “Jesus 101” and “Worship for Dummies.” It wouldn’t be new material; it would be a review of all the things we’ve learned along the way, but need to be reminded of from time to time. But even grown adults might not sign up for summer school, what with vacations, and ball games and lake homes competing for our attention.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians provides the perfect outline for summer school. Where does Paul begin? By reminding us of how we are to get along with our brothers and sisters in this world, and that’s where I want to begin today...talking about Christian unity.

Several years ago, the Bill Gaither Trio recorded a song with this lengthy title:
“How are we going to spend eternity in heaven
with those people we can’t stand on earth?”

You get the point? Christians don’t always get along. Catholics are at odds with Lutherans, Baptists struggle with Presbyterians, Episcopalians fight with everybody. And that’s just between denominations; many congregations have factions within them that divide people over what seem to be petty and often insignificant issues in their church. Paul says it shouldn’t be this way; not for the Body of Christ, not for people who are joined and knit together by the by the very ligaments of Jesus.

So Paul begins this section of his letter, which he is writing from a Roman jail, by the way, begins with these words: *I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with – listen to this – 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...*

What is Paul saying?

He is saying that when Jesus called us to be his Church, he wanted us to treat one another with dignity. Just like a body with all parts working together. These people at Resonate Church are our brothers and sisters. The members of First Evangelical Lutheran are our family. If someone transfers their membership from here to Community Bible or Columbia River Foursquare they aren’t going to “the dark side.” They are merely changing their address, and, probably, adding something to their next phase of training along their faith journey.

Let me ask this: How many churches are there along this short strip of highway 30 (Scappouse, Warren and St. Helens)? How many? One, that is all. It is God’s Church, and we are all a part of it. And yet, sometimes the way

behave – not just in this congregation, but in most congregations – the way we behave suggests that we have all the right answers and other churches are all wrong. I recall Billy Graham once saying that each denomination thinks they hold the direct line to heaven, and won't we be surprised when we get to heaven to discover that we held but a single strand from a giant rope?

We are one church, united as the Body of Christ. Now that's not to say that we all agree. On the contrary, we disagree much; with members of our own congregation, and with other churches as well. There may be differences of opinion on things political, or things theological, or issues regarding lifestyle. But the fact of the matter is that, as Christians, there is more that unites us than that which divides us. We are sinners, Jesus died for us. We are children of God who have been promised eternal life. We are commissioned to not only share the Good News, but to serve the disenfranchised of this world. Those are the things we have in common. Those are the qualities that set us apart as The Church.

What sorts of things divide us? Oh, the age we were baptized, I suppose, or the style of our worship services, or the fact that we serve grape juice instead of wine, or perhaps, it's the things we define as "sin." And I believe that it breaks God's heart to watch us bicker and divide over things as inconsequential as those. You think I haven't ever been at odds with other Christians, or criticized other churches? Of course I have, that's why I'm in summer school. And this is why Paul begins by saying "with humility and gentleness and patience, make every effort to maintain unity and peace." If we only did this, we would be a model for Christians and churches everywhere.

The second thing Paul teaches us in today's text is that we each have a different function in the Body of Christ. Some are pastors, some are teachers, some are bulletin-stuffers, some are musicians in worship, some are lawn-mowing people, some are craft-makers. But all are necessary!

Varied gifts, every one valuable, every one essential; that's how God created the church to be. And the conflict comes when we think that our gift, that what we do is more important than what someone else does. Or the conflict comes when we wish that we had been given a different gift and we're jealous of someone else.

I once learned, by playing the game Trivial Pursuit, that the most important body part when it comes to our balance while standing up is our big toes. Cut off your big toes and you would have a hard time walking in a straight line. Who knew the big toe could be so important? Yet, if we were to list the parts of the body that are desirable and necessary and significant, the big toe would be well down the list.

You are an important part of this Body of Christ. Whatever skill you possess, whatever gift you bring to the table, you are necessary. And sometimes when churches lose their balance and begin to wobble, I believe it is because some of its members are withholding their contribution of time or talent or treasure. You're the big toe, and you didn't even know it! Yet, we can't be a healthy body without you doing your part. Paul says this is basic to our being the church.

And the final lesson on this summer Sunday morning is perhaps the most important of the day: Paul says "Speak the truth in love." I think that may be a dying art in our contemporary culture. We either speak the truth coldly and harshly, or we tell a lie. When it comes to speaking to people regarding their performance or their behavior, we either crucify them, or we are dishonest about what we really think.

When Herb Brooks was preparing the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey Team for Lake Placid, he was so frustrated with their progress, he announced to the team "You guys are playing worse every day, and right now, you're playing like next week." That's not the type of encouragement that will make people feel all warm and fuzzy inside! He spoke the truth!

On the other hand, in August 2005, when the city of New Orleans was rotting away in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, President Bush announced on national television his appraisal of FEMA Director Mike Brown. "Brownie, you're doing a heckuva job." No he wasn't! People in New Orleans were ignored and dying. It took 4 days to get water to the Superdome. But the President did what so many of us often do; he soft-pedaled the truth so as to not hurt feelings.

In the church, we should know better. Speaking the truth in love means that we are honest about what a person has

done or said, because we care about them, we are connected to them. We're not trying to tear them down, we're trying to build them up! We speak not trying to hurt them, we're trying to help them. And if that's not your motive when you confront someone, don't confront them, because you won't be speaking the truth in love.

I have been privileged in my ministry to have had people around me who have spoken the truth in love to me.

- "Pastor, that sermon had three endings! You could've stopped with the first one."
- "Pastor, I enjoyed everything you said this morning. Here's something to think about: when the rancher goes out to field to feed the cows after a snow storm and only one cow shows up. The rancher doesn't dump the whole load of hay."

Honesty. When I have done well, they have been generous with their praise; when I could have done better, they were honest and direct with me, but it didn't feel like criticism. That's what the Apostle Paul is talking about, and it is that sort of truth-speaking that can make a church a safe and growing place.

Well, class is almost over. You've been very attentive students today, and just so you know, there WILL be a test! And I encourage you to come back next Sunday, when the sermon is entitled "Have You Had Any Good Church Fights Lately?"