

RADICAL LOVE IN A RISKY WORLD:
RADICAL LOVE IS TRUTHFUL
Ephesians 4:14-16

Dr. J. Howard Olds
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Every time I preach a sermon on “Loving Your Enemies” it seems to conjure up more questions than answers. Such was the case with the sermon last week. I was hardly out of the pulpit when people wanted to know: What about truth and justice? How could Jesus teach non-violence and then announce that he came not to bring peace but a sword? Did not the same Jesus who said turn the other cheek also turn the tables in the temple and drive out the moneychangers in a moment of, at best, righteous anger if not indignant rage?

Searching minds want to know and rightfully so. So we turn to a well-known phrase in the book of Ephesians for our text today that I think will help us understand. Here is what it says. *Speaking the truth in love, we will in all ways grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ.* Speaking the truth in love, ah, that is the challenge. Strong persons always hold in a living blend, strongly marked opposites. Or as the German philosopher, Hegel put it: “Truth is not in the thesis or the antithesis, but it is the emergent synthesis which reconciles the two.” So the Bible says:

*Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves
Be angry and sin not
Speak the truth in love.*

And so in properly holding that tension between what appears to be two opposites and finding the synthesis between them we find Christian truth. Let us try hard today to unpack this saying. I suspect you have said more times than once, “Speak the truth in love.”

SPEAK THE TRUTH

“Speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.” What does that mean? Truth begins with HONESTY. Truth is that which is real, genuine, authentic, dependable, accurate, factual. Truth is that which corresponds with reality.

Up in the hills of Eastern Kentucky, there was a mountaineer who gained a reputation as an excellent marksman. He was a legend in his own time because of his incredible ability with a .22 rifle. The forest around his home was filled with trees covered in circles drawn with white chalk. In the center of each white circle was a bullet hole. People were amazed. What they did not know was that the mountaineer shot first — then drew the circle.

Truth today suffers greatly from the spins of pundits and the beliefs of relativists. Truth for some means what I have decided you need to know. Truth for others is self-centered. I’ve got my truth and you’ve got your truth. So be it! It’s all

relative anyway since there's no such thing as absolute truth. So, you just pursue your truth and I'll pursue my truth and we don't have to worry about it. Of course, we don't in many ways until we run into something that is just absolutely wrong no matter how you feel about it, like abuse, or like the exploitation of children, or like racism. It doesn't matter your opinion about that. That stuff is just wrong! Any way you cut it, truth is honesty.

Honesty implies INTEGRITY. The root word of integrity means "to touch." People of integrity fit together. They are whole persons in which all the parts are touching. The mind, body, heart, and spirit are all aligned with each other, giving that person a kind of depth and grounding. Integrity means that what we say corresponds with what we inwardly know to be true. We say what we mean and mean what we say. That is integrity. That's the kind of truth in our innermost being and in our relationship with others that we've got to strive for in the midst of life.

And Paul says we've got to have it in the Church. That's what he's talking about here in the 4th chapter of Ephesians. He gives us a list of spiritual gifts. He talks about apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and a host of other spiritual gifts that makes the Church what it is. But we must make every effort in the midst of all of these multiple gifts to maintain the unity of the spirit, for there is one body and one spirit, just as there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. Integrity means that it fits together. Not that it's all just alike. The body is not all just alike. But the body does have unity and one part has to work with the other part. That, said Paul, is accomplished when we dare to speak the truth in love.

Truth thrives in OPENNESS. Speak the truth. What is truth? Well, it's honesty; it's integrity. The truth is open, and transparent. That's what truth is.

Fred Buechner in his book Telling Secrets says, "One November morning when I was ten-years-old, my father got up early, put on a pair of gray slacks and maroon sweater, opened the door briefly and gazed at my brother and me playing, and then went down into the garage where he turned on the engine of the family Chevy and sat down on the running board to wait for the exhaust to kill him. There was no funeral to mark his death. Since the family rules included don't talk, don't trust, and don't feel, my father's life was seldom mentioned again."

Now, some 40 to 50 years later, Buechner writes a book lamenting that he can't go on living until he goes back and deals with this event in his life.

What is unspoken is not forgotten. It is repressed only to surface again as sadness, depression, rage, resentment. What we resist, persists. Or as one person lamented "Of course I am out of my mind. It's dark and scary in there." Truth is openness. It's facing the realities, even the difficult ones in the midst of my life.

As I read through the Bible again with many of you, I have come to this conclusion about all of that stuff that goes on in the Old Testament. If God can

have mercy on the warring, killing, conniving people of the Old Testament there is surely some hope for me.

Lately, I've been reading through II Samuel. It's got the famous plots in there, like David and Bathsheba. Everybody knows that story. But I had almost forgotten the story of Tamar and Amnon, children of King David. They were half-brother and sister. Nevertheless, Amnon, in a vicious plot, pretends to be sick and rapes Tamar when she brings him some dumplings to eat. King David, their father, hears the story, is enraged by it, but doesn't do anything about it. How can he ignore what is going on? Furthermore, he is a king, he has political responsibility for the behavior of society and chooses to do nothing.

As Paul Harvey would say if you read the rest of the story, you would see how it comes back to haunt him. Another of his sons, Absalom, in his rage over that experience kills Amnon and rises up in rebellion against King David. It's a sordid story but it tells something about what happens when evil is not confronted.

Evil that is not confronted, multiplies. There is no peace without justice. There is no justice without openness. If the Church has learned nothing else in the last 20 years, I hope we have learned not to sweep our dirt under the carpet in an effort to save face and avoid conflict. The Church of all institutions of society ought to deal with all the truth even when it is brittle and harsh and awful. Speak the truth, speak the truth.

SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE

The Bible calls us to be tough-minded but tender-hearted. Love needs to be true, but truth needs to be loving. Lovingly know and knowingly love. As Aristotle put it — Speak the right truth, to the right person, at the right time, in the right way, for the right reason. I'd like to unpack that a little bit. Speak the right TRUTH to the right PERSON at the right TIME in the right WAY, for the right REASON.

Speak the right truth to the right Person. Lewis Smedes writes "Not every truth I have in my head is mine to tell. A truth confided to me in trust, a truth I promised someone that I would not tell, is not my truth to tell. If my truth will needlessly diminish another or hurt another, or tarnish another, it is not my truth to tell."

Confidentiality has been severely compromised in our time. We are wary. People sit in my office and say, "Now, can I trust you with this?" All I can give is "My word." But life has taught us to be mistrustful, hasn't it? I appeal to you today to return to the territory of keeping confidences with other people. There are some things you know that nobody else ought to ever know because it's not going to help anything by revealing it. If blabbing secrets were a virtue, all of America would be going to heaven.

Smedes goes on to tell about two writers working on a book about the Ford family. They were interviewing Henry Ford II and getting less than they wanted from him. Ford told them "There's a lot of stuff you're never going to know about me. And the reason you are not going to know is not necessarily because I don't want

to tell you. But it tears down the other person and that isn't fair to them."

Speak the right truth, to the right person, at the right TIME.

In dance, in sports, in speech, in music, in life, timing is everything.

You have no obligation to tell a father that your son made Phi Beta Kappa the day his son dropped out of community college. The time to celebrate your promotion is not in the presence of the person who just got fired. It will probably be difficult to plan a family vacation in the midst of a family fight.

Vicki Edwards says "It's nice to talk with people who can make a point without impaling anyone on it." How we say things may be as important as what we say. I don't have a problem speaking the truth. I just find it easier to speak it in anger, rage and resentment, than in love.

I am concerned about the mean-spiritedness that has emerged as a main agenda in America, especially in the Church. There are times when it may be necessary to be polemical for the sake of the gospel but it is seldom wise to be partisan in the fight for the faith. Truth does not demand arrogance or pride. Truth doesn't need that. The truest Person who ever lived on earth walked this earth with humility. He really did. His authority was from within, not how loud He shouted or preached. Speak the truth, but speak it in love, said Paul, to the right person, at the right time, in the right way for the right reason.

FOR THE RIGHT REASON

Gossip these days is a multi-billion dollar business. Books, magazines, television, and radio talk shows thrive on gossip. They can't seem to produce enough of it to satisfy our voyeuristic souls. Why is gossip so prevalent? Because it pays. It pays enormous dividends. So a nation rises up in protest against a tell-all book by O. J. Simpson until the editor finally pulls it from the press. But Newsweek Magazine cannot resist the temptation to print one chapter of it. Why? It's greed. When greed lines up with gossip, we set ourselves on a dangerous, dangerous path.

A truth told for the wrong reason can do more harm than a lie told for the right reason. A lie can be denied and proven false. But a bad truth can only be repeated, exaggerated, and inflated until people just grovel all over it.

Speak the truth in love. That's a pretty good saying. It came from the Bible. *Speak the truth in love.* Face the facts. Don't live in hiddenness but let the words of our mouths be spoken in love to other people. And when you put truth and love together that, my friends, is radical.

Amen.