

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Pentecost 10 (Proper 13), Series B
Saturday, August 4, 2012
Sunday, August 5, 2012

Sermon: Speaking the Truth in Love¹

Text: Ephesians 4:1-16

Focus Statement: Jesus' Word of truth is always a Word of love.

Function Statement: That they would speak the truth in love without sacrificing truth or love.

Sermon Structure: Text Applied

Doctrinal Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way" (SC, 8th Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The Word of God that engages us today is Paul's letter to the Ephesians, especially these words: "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph. 4:15, ESV).² "*Speaking the truth in love.*" That has got to be one of the hardest things for us to do! How do we speak the truth in love when we live in a critical culture, a society in which we automatically assume the worst about other people and their actions? Rumors, innuendos, half truths, and lies are the order of the day, and in

¹ This is a revision of a sermon originally preached at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Englewood, Colorado, on Sunday, August 2, 2009. The Elders may use this as a "backup" sermon in case Pastor is unavailable to preach.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

our war of words, we're always ready to ratchet it up another notch as we try to out-shout the other person. The media manufacture controversy in order to sell newspapers and boost T.V. ratings—and we buy into it. Gossip magazines in the supermarket checkout make money from exposing the flaws and failures of celebrities, politicians, and other famous people. We love these insinuations and lies more than truth because they give us something exciting to talk about, as well as ammunition for our arguments. And when someone offends us personally, we're more likely to broadcast it on our blogs and in our water cooler conversations than to speak to the person directly and respectfully face to face.

I wish I could say that's just the way of the world, but, sadly, it's also the way we often operate in the Church. Christians also struggle to tame their tongues. The Eighth Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness," is probably the hardest of the Ten to keep (Ex. 20:16). When someone offends us or does something we don't like, we usually assume the worst and exaggerate the situation, instead of giving our brother or sister the benefit of the doubt. And then we tend to do one of

two things: (1) we either blast them with an angry attack; or (2) we brew and stew about it, talking about them behind their backs. How many arguments between friends and families have degenerated into feuds? How many relationships have been ruined by the rumor wheel? We spread lies and gossip like germs, infecting our families, friendships, and fellowship with poison.

But that's not how it's supposed to be. As my friend, Pastor Eckelkamp says, "We need to learn to speak the truth in love without sacrificing either truth or love." As followers of Jesus Christ, we are united by truth: the truth of God's Word, the truth of God's love and forgiveness, the truth of Jesus Christ who *is* "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). God's truth unifies us in "one body and one Spirit... one hope...one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph. 4:4-6). Christian fellowship with God and each other is based on *truth*. Jesus says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). The truth gives faith, freedom, forgiveness, and friendship with God. That's why Paul tells us we are to speak the truth in love.

But it's not enough merely to speak the truth. We must speak the truth *in love*. "Be completely humble and gentle," writes Paul. "Be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Eph. 4:2, NIV). It's possible to speak the truth without being loving. Sometimes we use the truth as a weapon to hurt people. We wear our hearts on our sleeves—and then smear it all over their faces. We bang them over the head with the Bible and beat up on them because of their sins. We act all "holier than thou," although as fellow sinners we should always be "*lowlier* than thou."³ We try to disgrace them instead of gracing them with the forgiveness God has shown us. But God's truth is never intended for hurt or harm. As Dr. Schmitt, a friend of mine at the Seminary, said in a recent sermon, "The Law is never hate speech; it's always the language of love."⁴

Luther's explanation of the 8th Commandment illustrates this:

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation; but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the

³ David Schmitt, Sermon on Amos 7:7-15, from iTunes Chapel Sermons podcast (July 16, 2009).

⁴ *Ibid.*

kindest way” (*Small Catechism*, Explanation of 8th Commandment).

When God speaks his Word of Law to us, his motivation is always love. He wants to grab our attention and bring us back to his loving arms. He wounds that he may heal us (Hos. 6:1).

But all too often *we* wound because, having been hit, we want to hit back harder. What we say may be “truth,” but if it’s not said in love, it doesn’t need to be said. If we can’t speak the truth in love, we shouldn’t say it at all. If we want to hurl insults or threats because they hurt us first, then we should keep quiet instead. If we want to go and gossip about them to everyone we know, we are better off remaining silent. Not everything that’s true needs to be broadcasted. The psalmist says, “Be angry, but do not sin” (Psalm 4:4). And later in Ephesians 4, Paul urges us, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be *kind* to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving* one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:31-32).

Jesus himself says that if someone sins against you, you’re not supposed to go tell everyone about what a horrible thing the person did.

Rather, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother” (Matt. 18:15). Only after trying several times to reconcile with the other person do you even *think* about bringing other people into it. And even then, the motivation is never to gang up and beat up on the other person. The motivation is always to reconcile with the other person and restore the relationship. You speak the truth about the other person’s sin so that sin can be confessed and forgiven. And you speak the truth in love to protect the unity God has given us.

Jesus is the best one at speaking the truth in love. His Word of Law shows us our sin, and his Word of Gospel shows us our Savior (*Him!*). The Bible says Jesus is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). With Jesus, truth and grace always go together. Think of how many times Jesus spoke the truth in love. When people sinned, Jesus wasn’t afraid to tell them. But he always said it out of love, so they would turn from their sin and turn to him for mercy. To the woman caught in adultery, Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more” (John 8:11). To the “sinful” woman who washed his feet with her

hair, Jesus said, “Your sins are forgiven” (Luke 7:48). To the wicked, crooked man Zacchaeus, Jesus said, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9). And when the Roman soldiers gambled for Jesus’ clothing at the cross, he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Jesus never denied that these people sinned. But he never denied them grace either. Jesus spoke the truth in love, without sacrificing either truth or love. He spoke the truth so that their sins could be confessed; he spoke in love so that their sins could be forgiven.

And Jesus forgives *your* sins. He forgives all your sins of anger, self-righteousness, judgment, hypocrisy, and un-grace. Jesus says, “You’re forgiven” for all the times you gossiped, talked behind someone’s back, didn’t put the best construction on things, or twisted the story to hurt someone’s reputation. For all that, you’re forgiven. God’s truth says, “You’re wrong, you sinned.” But God’s love in Christ says, “I have taken away your sins, and you are forgiven.”

Like the Roman soldiers, we are forgiven, for we know not always what we do. Christ died for us on the cross that all our sins might be

washed away in his blood, and we might be made clean. “Grace was given *to each one of us* according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph. 4:7). The truth is that Christ’s gift of grace is *immeasurable*. It’s so abundant and so overflowing that you can never count or quantify it. Your cup “runneth over” (Ps. 23:5, KJV).

As Christ’s love fills you up, it overflows and spills into the lives of those around you. Your heart bleeds Christ’s love. Your lips drip with it. And we learn to speak the truth in love, “bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:2), and “forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:34). We’re all sinners, and none of us “deserve” God’s grace. (According to Ephesians 2:8, grace is a *gift!*) But God’s love is bigger than sin, and his grace is the biggest truth of all. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ☩ the Holy Spirit. Amen.