

SERMON: Loving Conflict: Speak the Truth
TEXT: Ephesians 4:14-16

10-18-20

“Does this dress make me look fat?” Now, every man knows - or should know - that the answer to this question from a woman you love is a very tricky matter! Most women I know are very sensitive about their weight and their body shape, so tread lightly, gentlemen, and choose your words carefully! In this case, speaking the truth in love, is not as easy as it sounds!

Actually, it's *never* as easy as it sounds, and it's no joking matter. Vanessa is a friend of mine who, during her first marriage, had gained a lot of weight. Her husband at the time never said a word about it, but another friend of hers reached out and expressed concern for her health. Vanessa then looked into a medical weight loss program this friend recommended to her. She followed it and lost about 70 pounds. One of the issues leading to her divorce was her disappointment and hurt that her husband had never approached her to “speak the truth in love” about her weight and her health.

You may remember the movie, *A Few Good Men*, from 1992. There's a famous and unforgettable courtroom scene where Tom Cruise, playing the part of military lawyer, Lieutenant Daniel Kaffee, is hammering away at a witness about

the hazing death of a Marine recruit. The witness is a high ranking officer, Colonel Nathan Jessup, played by Jack Nicholson. After a series of hard-hitting accusations and forming a theory of what really happened, the lawyer asks the Colonel about his involvement. The heated exchange went like this:

“You want answers?”

“I think I’m entitled to answers.”

“You want answers?”

“I want the truth!”

“You can’t handle the truth!”

Indeed. It is hard to handle the truth. The truth can hurt. The truth can be frightening or heartbreaking or overwhelming in a great variety of ways. The truth can be life-changing. The truth can force us to face harsh realities when it would be so much easier to remain in blissful ignorance. But without truth, there is no justice. In the absence of truth, there is no growth.

And growth is really the goal being emphasized in the verses from Ephesians we read earlier. Let’s hear them again. “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. But speaking the truth in love, we must

grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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."

According to one commentary, these three verses show the contrast between maturity and childishness. Those who are childish are morally immature, and easily succumb to trickery, deceit, and scheming from false prophets. But those who are mature have mutual concern and support for one another. They respond to sound teaching and are focused on building up the body of Christ by speaking the truth in love. (The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XI, p. 423)

Furthermore, the book of Ephesians was written to "dislocate audiences from life in the everyday world and relocate them in Christ.... Discipleship in Ephesians entails leaving behind the practices of alienation and hostility taught by the world and embodying the vision of reconciliation, peace, and human unity that is the accomplishment of Christ's death on the cross and the continuing manifestation of his comprehensive reign as Lord of heaven and earth." (Stanley Saunders, The Discipleship Bible)

In this second installment of my sermon series, we are focusing on the second section of the document, *Seeking to be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians in Times of Disagreement*. The guidelines for “speaking the truth in love” provide helpful specifics on *how* to do this.

First, “speaking the truth in love” requires that we share our concerns directly with the group or individual with whom we disagree. For instance, perhaps two of you are leaving church following worship, and one of you comments, “I wish Ellen’s sermons were longer.” The other person, in an effort to encourage direct communication might reply, “I think that’s something you should visit with Ellen about.”

Second, we speak the truth in love by questioning others on their ideas and suggestions, rather than their motives, intelligence, or integrity. For example, questioning a person’s sanity or calling someone a *nasty* person doesn’t really help anyone learn about their ideas, or why they hold a certain belief. Not only do comments like this tear that person down, they tear down the whole group. Name calling and questioning motives takes the focus away from the subject being discussed and places it on the personality of the speaker. Consequently, no one learns anything or has any opportunity for growth.

Often, when we share our personal experiences behind our passionate opinions, others may better understand our position. I remember a class discussion from college, when we were discussing the ethics of euthanasia, and whether it should be legal to allow a person with a terminal illness or no hope of recovery to hasten their death. One classmate explained her position through tears by sharing the example of a close relative in that situation. I don't remember what her position was, but I do remember that I considered it more carefully after hearing her story.

Another commentary explained, "When Paul talks of speaking the truth in love, he means more than frankness of speech tempered by love." It involves our inward and outward disposition." It is an attitude and a way of being. "We have the capacity to apprehend the truth, the desire and power to live the truth, so that all that we are and do will be truth in love." (Maxie D. Dunnam, *The Communicator's Commentary*)

I read an article recently in which the writer expressed concern that how we speak to one another more and more lacks respect and kindness. Instead, the writer suggests three questions to ask yourself before you speak. "They are short and to the point and will quickly let you know if what you are about to say is best left unsaid."

“First, **is it true?** Do you know for certain that what you are about to say is true? Or is it gossip, hearsay, or opinion? If it is false, it is best to keep it to yourself. If it is true, proceed to the second question.

Is it kind? Oh my, how unkind we can be to one another! Is it because we are mean-spirited? Maybe. More likely it is because we have been hurt or angered and can get the most mileage out of hateful or harsh words. So ask yourself if what you are about to say is kind, benevolent, considerate. If it is true, move on to question three.

Is it necessary? Have you ever noticed someone who speaks many words but says very little? I expect you know someone like this. Maybe it is you. Often we have to get in the last word. We have to have our say. We have to prove our point. Will your words add to the conversation? Are they essential to ensure understanding? Or are they just words on top of more words?” (Steph Marks, 3 Questions to Ask Before You Speak, stephmarks.com, February 8, 2015)

In a spirit of trust and love, may we practice **LOVING CONFLICT**, and may we make this promise to God, to others, and to ourselves to **SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE**, to the glory of God! **AMEN.**