

**February 4, 2018 – Journey Worship**

**TEXT: Ephesians 4:1–16**

**TITLE: Speak the Truth**

*By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf*

Developmental psychologist, Susan Pinker wanted to figure out what helped people to live longer lives. She learned of an Italian island named Sardinia. Here, there are six times as many centenarians as on the Italian mainland and 10 times as many as in North America. And this is the only place where men live as long as women. So she decided to do some research to find out why Sardinians lived so long. It turns out that genes only accounted for 25% of their longevity—the rest was lifestyle. So what were they doing right? Well, it turned out that longevity had little to do with eating a low-fat diet or exercise or even a positive attitude. Don't get me wrong—they helped! But the biggest predictor for a long life is *connection*, human interaction. She found this:

Close relationships came in at the top of the list. She says, “These are the people that you can call for a loan if you need money suddenly, who will call the doctor if you're not feeling well or who will take you to the hospital or who will sit with you if you're having an existential crisis, if you're in despair.” These are the people who know you, who value you, who you can count on for almost anything.

But the number two spot was filled by something a little more surprising. This factor is known as *social integration*. She learned that the second most common predictor longevity is predicted by simply coming in face-to-face contact with and speaking to others. “How many people do you talk to? These mean both your weak and your strong bonds...do you talk to the guy who every day makes your coffee? Do you talk to the postman? Do you talk to the woman who walks by your house every day with her dog? Those interactions are one of the strongest predictors of how long you'll live.”<sup>1</sup>

Somehow without the benefit of scientific research, Paul knew the importance of connection within the life of the early church. Most of his letters were steered toward trying to help the church be a community reflective of God's love and God's call, in light of the crises of the day. His letter to the church in Ephesus is no different.

From the first to the last verses of this passage, Paul is calling the church to relationship. Leading a life worthy of the calling of Christ means *what?* Relationship. He says: “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.” Love each other. Navigate conflict knowing that the Spirit has drawn you together. Be humble and patient and gentle—go easy on each other, as God has gone easy on you.

And in the last verse of our text he brings out the illustration of the body that he spells out in 1 Corinthians once more. From Christ, “the whole body is joined and knit together by every ligament...promoting the body's growth in building itself up in love.” Paul

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<sup>1</sup> Ted talk - longevity

insists that our individual health is reliant upon the health of our community, our network. We are a part of each other, simply put. We make each other stronger.

It's clear from this text that the church in Ephesus was engaged in their own exercise of discerning the "fake news" of the day. Paul cautions against false teachings, competing doctrine, trickery and craftiness of others, much like we politely point each other to news sources we find "more reliable" these days. What is most interesting to me about this passage is that the protection against the schemes of others is not to hide out or to check Snopes. Rather it is to "Speak the truth in love" and follow Jesus. The ability to discern the truth is somehow connected to the ability to speak the truth *in love*.

For many of us "speaking the truth in love" means politely letting someone know if they have broccoli in their teeth or if the dress they are trying on really should remain on the rack. Many of us know that even *this* degree of truth-telling can feel hard and complicated. We don't want to offend. We don't want to wound the relationship. Or, sometimes frankly we don't want to edit our words for politeness and we try to drop the "in love" part of the command. (We just don't have the whole "bless her heart" thing down in Pittsburgh!)

And frankly, our withdrawal into the world behind our devices has created a conundrum of sorts for our world. We are more connected than ever and less so all at the same time. We rattle off a comment on a Facebook thread, but would never recognize the person on whose post we're commenting in line at the grocery store. We send out a tweet with content with global implications without missing a beat because it's easier to send stuff into the universe when we don't need to look someone in the eye.

And then we have all noticed that the world seems more divided in recent years. Perhaps new divisions have surfaced, or perhaps biases we've tried to hide have come into the clear light of day. But we feel more divided—along party lines, as well as along racial lines, gendered lines...the list goes on. NPR has even done stories covering families who voted differently in the 2016 election—and found that some families are more divided, feeling like they can't get together without getting in a fight.

If we long for unity, we need Paul's words now more than ever! Truth has become a moving target and love is sometimes hard to come by.

*So how do we take these words to heart?* How do we get serious about speaking the truth in love: with people we love and with people we can't stand? With family we are close to and with family who don't understand us? How do we do it when we have a different perspective than someone with whom we share a pew, a bus, an office, a home?

See, Paul knew that it is often hard to overcome dividing lines. He lived in a society that had a strict sense of hierarchy, of social engagement, of who "belonged" and who did not. And so he takes a whole letter to lay out for the Ephesians the spiritual reality that in Christ, God has shaken things up. He reminds them that they are participants in a

new reality—not simply because they have chosen to follow Jesus, but because God called them. And even if they didn't recognize God's call, human interaction has empirically shifted. The boundaries and norms that they have been learning since childhood have fallen away. Christ breaks down walls and bridges the breach. They can't take their "camps" for granted anymore. They are called to something new.

And so Paul tries to get them to see that they need to work on this because their life depends on it. They are healthier when they are connected together—whether they like it or not. And so speaking the truth in love is a step toward the unity they already have in Christ.

Friends, we need connection too. We need it to thrive, to heal, to be our strongest selves. And we, like the Ephesians, are one—drawn together by the creative genius of God and unified in Christ. So how can we live like it? How can we speak the truth in love?

We can tell the truth of our beliefs while still truly listening to the beliefs of another. We can choose not to shut down the argument but to hear the "why" behind a different opinion.

We can check ourselves and ask who are we "loving" by our ideas and our actions? Ourselves? Others like us? People different from us? Those who are vulnerable?

We can tell the stories that aren't told. We can help someone whose voice is pushed to the margins get in front of a mic—figuratively and literally. We can advocate for the vulnerable.

We can confess our sins. We can tell the story of our failings and name our shortcomings.

But we can also tell the story of a God who has designed a unity in Christ so powerful that even our most stalwart attempts to divide ourselves falls short. We can tell the story of a God who bridged the gap between creator and creation, between humanity and the divine, and who does the same in us—healing, reconciling and offering us new life. We can follow his lead: teaching, forgiving, and healing those who are hurting.

As we gather at this communion table, we can tell the story of who we are and whose we are. We can tell the truth that in Christ, love has changed us, made us new and set us free. Thanks be to God.