

Meditation 1: "Why Truth and Love Belong Together"

Scripture Lesson 1: Ephesians 4:1-16

4I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." ⁹(When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) ¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We 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. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from 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.

My wife is a teacher - not only a teacher, but a junior high teacher. Not only a junior high teacher, but a junior high language arts teacher, a teacher of English. Which means she often has to deal with very sensitive situations. I overheard her recently telling someone about how she has learned to effectively handle a re-occurring reality of her profession - the dreaded phone call to a parent. This happens when grades are failing, behavior is unacceptable, words are inappropriate, essential work is missing, or attitudes need serious adjustment. Situations where the truth has to be shared. In this particular case, my wife was telling about a particular situation where she had to call the parents of a child who had, and I quote, "dropped the F-bomb." Extremely inappropriate; in fact, it not only shocked Terri, but made her angry, that this student, who otherwise was pretty respectful and holding their own, would be so disrespectful to use such language at school - especially in the presence of other students and teachers. So without mentioning names or identifying the family at all, keeping things respectfully general, my wife laid out the effective strategy she has employed over the years - how to tell parents the hard, difficult truth about their child that they needed to know, and how to tell such difficult truth in a way that the parents cannot only hear and understand - but to which they are motivated to actively respond.

I have discerned four steps that comprise this effective communication from teacher to parent, and I'd like to outline them here:

ALWAYS START WITH AFFIRMATIONS about the student - their good behavior, their good intentions, their willingness to respond, their attitude

when class is in session.....Terri makes a comment regularly which I greatly appreciate - that there is always something positive to share.

MENTION HIGHER EXPECTATIONS in the context of what's best for the student and for the class; that class members depend upon each other to tow a higher line of behavior and attitude so that all may progress and succeed; and that as all students aim more towards helpful things, success becomes more likely.

DESTIGMATIZE THE OFFENSE - so very often, Terri has to make sure the parents understand that in no way does this mean their child is bad or lesser than any other child; no, this is not a deal-breaker; this is not something that can't be addressed and improved upon.

AND EMPHASIZE THAT YOU KNOW THE CHILD CAN DO BETTER, and that as their teacher she will aim at helping the child improve, alongside the efforts of the parents.

Four steps, four approaches, four ingredients to effective communicationwhich may seem a bit complicated. But really, all these steps toward effective communication could be summed up in one step, one crucial step, that cannot help but move effective communication along. In the words of Paul in our passage today, it is this:

Tell the truth - in love.

This is incredibly timely counsel for us humans in today's contexts, for we have all seen the struggle we have when hard, difficult truths rise to the surface. Some of today's hard truths that many find hard to face are flatly denied or enthusiastically avoided, as evidenced by the positions people take against vaccines or the denial that our climate is negatively affected by human activity or that there are still calls for a recount on our last national election even though all claims of major significant fraud have been debunked.

For some people, some truths are very difficult if not impossible to face.

It is apparent that many if not most climate change deniers or antivaxxers or white supremacists or anti-LGBTQ attitudes will not be convinced by logic nor reason to change their views; it is too often the case that experts in their field who share the hard truths are ignored or humiliated rather than respected; it would seem that common sense is not so common as once thought, as we see so very many people deny what most see as obvious even as they recognize the difficulties.....so what is there to do?

Paul's counsel remains our greatest hope - to keep on telling the truth, IN LOVE. The truth Jesus came to the world to share. The truth that God loves us beyond measure, and loves with the same measure the one we disagree with. The truth that if something is true, it will have staying power, and will not be dissolved by untruth. The truth that if we also depend upon the staying power our connection to God gives us, our lives will be founded upon things that will not be taken away.

So, we need to keep speaking the truths Jesus stands for, yes, the pleasant truths we love to hear, but especially the hard truths we need to hear.

We need to counter any narrative that seeks to hide the dark side of history for the sake of convenience or false security.

We need to speak against racism and prejudice which is a darkness all are prone to.

We need to speak against violence in all its forms, and have that speech move into action on all levels - personal conduct, governmental legislation, international dialogue.

We need to speak for a better way to live on this planet, with the care of creation a priority.

We must speak out against efforts to maintain an unjust status quo, whether it be due to excessive wealth disparities or practices promoting exclusivity or blocking historical wrongs that have yet to be corrected.

But we need to speak all of these things in love. Love that is not warm and fuzzy perhaps, but love that is serious about the value of the lives around us and the world in which we live, as things God cares about, and asks us to care about as well.

For truth which is spoken in love not only sets the course for life itself; it makes that life worth living in the first place.

Meditation 2: "Perpetual Dining"

Scripture Lesson 2: John 6:24-35

²²The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. ²³Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. ²⁵When they found him on the

other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" ²⁶Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

²⁸Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" ²⁹Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." ³⁰So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" ³²Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." ³⁵Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

One of my favorite movies of all time is Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory -the original movie starring Gene Wilder as Willie Wonka, Peter Ostrum as Charlie, and Jack Albertson as Grandpa Joe. What an adventure, with Charlie and Grandpa Joe and other children and parents taking a grand tour of the most remarkable factory in the world.....and in between all the scenes of that movie, truths are scattered like sugar-coated parables regarding what is right and true and good, and what is not so good, as evidenced in the behavior of most of the children who are basically spoiled rotten.

In any event, lest I recount the whole tale, there's one scene in particular that I believe captures the fancy of most children when they first see this movie. The scene is where Willie Wonka has invited the children to observe his most secretive, most significant invention of all - a shroud-covered mechanism that produces what he calls an everlasting gobstopper. What, you ask, is an everlasting gobstopper? The children ask this too, where upon Mr. Wonka turns the machine on; underneath the shroud things begin moving and making strange sounds, and at the far end of the contraption a conveyor belt is turning out rainbow colored candies about the size of a walnut. Mr. Wonka picks one up and tells the children that what he holds in his hand is an everlasting gobstopper, a candy that will last forever - he says "You can suck on it and suck on it day after day, and it will never get any smaller." I remember my childhood mind thinking there couldn't be anything better than to have a piece of candy that would last forever; and I don't think I was alone! Mr. Wonka then hands one to each person on the tour, whereupon the inevitable happens - one of the most spoiled children, Varuca Salt, accuses another spoiled child, Violet Beauregard, of getting two, and states she want another one; a bit of a fight ensues. Mr. Wonka has finally had enough. He

says, "everybody has one, and one is enough for anybody." But I think you can tell on the faces of most of the children - they still want more.

Isn't this typical of human nature, to want more? More of the things we desire rather than need? More than is reasonable? More than we need?

Someone once said that there's enough in the world to satisfy all the needs in the world, but not all of the greed in the world. In a day and age when we have billionaires trying to outdo each other in taking joyrides into space, it would seem we have reached a new level of such imbalance.

We live in a world which can more and more be defined by the excesses of humanity, especially those excesses which speak of consumption. Not just food, but the material resources of this world; and not just material, but things that are less objectified, things like attention, reputation, fame, power, prestige, influence, and endearment.

Jesus has a word to say about this desire for more that wants to consume us - and it is a hard thing for the typical person to understand. It is hard because we live in a world that functions around convincing each and every person that they are insufficient in themselves and their setting; they need certain items to make life all that it can be, items which the convincing entity just happens to be selling. From cosmetics to cars, from restaurants to real estate, from exotic vacations to extreme sports, we are constantly deluged with the idea that more is better. We have come to the point that we hardly even question such a premise, so continuous is the message. We rarely recognize the hamster wheel we enter when our desires are unexamined.

Jesus says, ²⁷"Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.

Jesus says, "It is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

I think it is a great corruption of the intention of Jesus when the Christian church has reduced these statements to items of profession only. For when Jesus speaks of the bread of heaven, the bread of life, he is speaking of God's provision for all of life; to profess this acknowledgment is only the beginning of a life of central focus upon the one thing, the only thing, that matters - that we live into God's relationship with us, which Jesus makes possible.

You've heard about that monastery that invites novitiates into a rather austere environment; each new participant is taken to a room, more appropriately called a cell, which has four walls, a ceiling, one small bed, one small chair, one small table, and one candle on that table; there is absolutely nothing else in the room save a sign on the back of the door which says, "Tell us what you desire, and we'll show you how to live without it."

Jesus is making this point, a point not of material need but spiritual focus. We do need food, clothing, and shelter, but if we focus on such needs alone, they can easily become a lesser god we worship, a god which is not up to the task of life. If we make the material substance of this life too important, we fail to understand the "why" of it all; spiritual focus, or soulful discernment, is essential if we are to connect our desires with what really works for a full life. It is the "why" of life that must precede the "what" of life; reverse the two, and you have something that cannot endure.