

WHY WE GATHER
Grace-Filled Accountability

“Honest Love”
(Proverbs 12:15-18 & Ephesians 4:14-16)

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Introduction

1. About month ago I was going with my family to have breakfast at a restaurant. I was riding in the front passenger seat and was caught a little off guard by a bicycler who, right as we passed him, glared at me and into the front of our car like he was looking for something. Intently. And, with furled brow. I am a bike commuter and sometimes get frustrated when people in cars cut me off or make some aggressive move without seeing me. So, I wondered if he was simply transferring his anger at the wrong car, or cars in general!

Just as I was about to let it go, the bicycler caught up to us, and passed us while we were waiting in a line of cars for a light to change. And, as he was riding up to the front of the line of the cars, he again was looking closely in all of the front seats of the cars intently until he suddenly stopped, glared at the driver of the car at the front of the line, and started to wildly gesture to the driver, and when getting their attention acted as if he was holding a cell phone and texting, and then yelled “no texting” to make sure that the driver knew he caught them texting and driving, and that was illegal!

I am suspect that the bicycler was on his bike that day and riding on that road for the explicit purpose of catching people illegally texting, and publically shame them in the act. He was an illegal texting vigilante!

2. The whole experience got me thinking about the manner and ethics with which we communicate “Truth and our truth” to others. I say “Truth and our truth” because all good and earnest human beings reach to understand and live in sync with that which is True and that which is real. Minnesotans have wisely discerned the fact that operating a touch screen hand held computer simultaneously to operating a moving vehicle that weighs several thousand pounds is highly dangerous for everyone concerned, and thus wisely made it illegal. Capital T truth turned into a simple law.

Many things in life are not so obvious and clear, or agreed upon, as well. And, this is where the construct of “our truth” comes into play. Now, “our truth” isn’t necessarily *not* ultimate truth. I want to be clear on that point. It might be. It can be. And, it might not be because of the limitations of individual experience and the reality that there is a larger arc of human consciousness development that, like what we read in the arc of biblical history, is always taking two steps forward and one step back. Humans are always (and will always be, because we are not God) in a constant state of having and living ultimate Truth and reaching and not always having Truth all figured out. Whether or not we have been told this in our life, there is a difference between ultimate Truth and our truth. And, “our truth” is our personal, or communal, or institutional reaching for that which is ultimately True and the real.

3. I mention a few framing thoughts on the construct of “truth” because of the chaotic time we live in, and because truth and truthfulness has fallen on hard times. This sermon is not about the theological and philosophical implications of truth, though. I am pleased to let you know that two weeks from now Mark Olser, one of our community members, an esteemed lawyer and outstanding preacher, will give a sermon titled “What is Truth?” His Scripture text is the trial of Jesus in front of Pilot, and yet *I think he may have a few things to say about “fake news”!*

This sermon is about the *way* we speak our truth. We live in a time where there seems to be an unprecedented amount relational carnage because of *the way* everyone is speaking their truth to one another. Even long term relationships amongst families and affinity networks that have withstood decades of strong differing opinions are now crumbling because few know how to navigate the rapid pace of change and the volatile socio-political climate.

4. Today’s two Scripture texts will help us. They help us in two ways: First, to be wiser about the way we communicate our truth to others and second, to be more receptive to truth that comes to us from others such that overall we are more transformed in our understanding of Truth and better at loving as Christ loves.

A. Sharing Our Truth

1. The first Scripture is from Proverbs chapter twelve, verses 17-18:

¹⁷ An honest witness tells the truth,
but a false witness tells lies.

¹⁸ The words of the reckless pierce like swords,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Proverbs 12:17-18, NIV

The first half of this proverb assumes honesty as a basic and core human ethic. And, yet that is not the end of the story. The second half of the couplet tells us that we must be wise in the way we bring our honesty forward to others. Being truthful and honest isn’t enough. If we are reckless with our honesty, it is possible to not only hurt someone, it may even lead to that person not even considering what we have to say.

2. Humans are complicated and highly defended creatures. In regards to the more difficult and polarized topics of our time, many are like scared animals trapped in a corner. Some, and this is what we are seeking to become as a people here, are willing to be uncomfortable and less defended. But, many are ready to defend and fight to the death, particularly with the more intensely personal truth topics. In such instances, people will likely need to be encouraged out of their corner.

What does that look like? Well, the writer of today’s proverb said, “the tongue of the wise brings healing.” A later proverb, Chapter 27:6, says:

Wounds from a friend can be trusted,
But an enemy multiplies kisses.

Proverbs 27:7. NIV

The wise bring healing...the wounds of a friend can be trusted...these statements remind us of something critically important: *We*, are the medium of our message and how we embody our truth will improve or erode our chances of others being wooed out of a defensive posture.

3. What are some things to consider about the way we embody our truth? Wise people seeking to be truth telling friends are those who consider the quality of relationship that they have with the other person, the timing of the exchange, and the best way to frame the matter such that, again, the other person might let down their defenses and be open to a new way of thinking. It was African American novelist Octavia Butler who once said:

“Sometimes being a friend means mastering the art of timing. There is a time for silence. A time to let go and allow people to hurl themselves into their own destiny. And a time to prepare to pick up the pieces when it's all over.”¹

I personally struggle with this wise advice. Especially in regards to timing. For me, right now is always the right time, because it's on my mind! It's on my check list! And, speaking frankly, I am glad that I do not have the time right now to go into how many times I chose to spoke my truth to my wife Holly, to friends, and to parishioners, and had deep regrets about the timing. Let me give you some verified truth about timing: when you are about to walk out the door, nearly asleep, or a few seconds before a worship service begins...these are all very bad times to drop personal truth on anyone!

4. I am earnestly working on getting better on timing. And, First Covenant is a community that is earnestly and imperfectly working on creating safe spaces for everyone to navigate difficult topics and hard conversations that most of us are facing in day to day life. We seek to be a container held in the grace of God and in the Spirit of Christ, where we afford one another the room to work on our understandings of Truth. One space for this is a program we call the “Committee for Racial and Economic Justice” or “CREJ.” It is a once a month gathering covering a range of topics and where we often begin by articulating a shared ethic, that is an acronym called “R.O.P.E.S.”, which provides relational safety:

R = Respect/Risk

- Treat each other with respect, even if you disagree. No putdowns.
- Only one person speaks at a time. Listen carefully to each other without interruptions.

O = Openness/Ouch

- Speak honestly. The most respectful thing we can do together is to be real.
- Be willing to say what you really think about each topic. If you hold back, we cannot learn from you.

¹ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/o/octaviabut170210.html?src=t_timing (accessed 9-2-17)

- If someone or something offends you, it is your responsibility as a member of this Diversity circle to say, “Ouch.” Let the speaker finish, and then tell the group how you were hurt or angered and why.

P = Participation/Pass

- Speak briefly so everyone has a chance to participate.
- Stay on the topic at hand.

E = Education

- The facilitators are not always the experts. They are here to help facilitate the process.
- Everyone has come to the table to learn, grow, and share.

S = Sensitivity/Safety

- Use “I” Statements. Speak only for yourself, rather than as a representative for any group. Remember the others are only speaking for themselves.
- Confidentiality is important. Speak about what is happening, not who said it.

5. This ethic helps us keep relationships intact and grow stronger while tackling difficult topics—like last week’s intense conversation on the highly racially charged music video “The Story of O.J. by hip hop artist Jay-Z. Well done community!

B. Learning from Other People’s Truth

1. Now, turning to the other side of the communication continuum—it is important to be willing to let down our defenses and be open to diverse ways of thinking. Returning to today’s Proverbs text, and backing up a few verses: Proverbs Chapter 12:15-16

¹⁵The way of fools seems right to them,
but the wise listen to advice.

¹⁶Fools show their annoyance at once,
but the prudent overlook an insult.

Proverbs 12:15-16. NIV

2. We are in a time where many lead with annoyances and insults when telling our truth. And, this is largely the case because technology and social media allows us to create affinity groups that can double as very loud echo chambers. So, it is very easy, even encouraged that a person weaponize their truth, blast away at the enemy, and then be given a standing ovation by their group because of the bombardment. Now, I want to be clear and say that confrontation is important. African American social reformer Frederick Douglass is famous for saying “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” And, sadly, going into battle is necessary for Truth to advance. And yet, it seems that with modern truth telling and across platforms, more often than not, people start with battle and then consider other options.

As an aside, I heard it said once that “we go to war not to make peace, but because peace can’t be made.” Battle is unavoidable, but we should be clear minded that it is not the space where peace making is accomplished. It is where things break.

The same is true with the way our affinity groups coalesce around our truths and seek to influence some other group who that we wish would change their version of truth. Sometimes, as groups, we have to go into battle for a truth cause that we believe in. And yet, what history seems to be teaching us is that transformation is often found on the edges of our toils, in the smaller groups and the one on one conversations. And between opponents who have enough of a relationship to stay at the table of dialogue until over time there is a change in shared consciousness on what is true and what is not true. That is where the real transformation takes place. And where Christ-like love has a chance to be birthed between people.

3. I want to be transparent as I stand in this position as a Christian pastor--my greatest struggles with the exchange of Truth and my truth is with other Christians. And, on some days I am completely discouraged by the way some Christians go into battle with no appreciative inquiry about one another’s truth. The most difficult to deal with are those who claim their group amongst the tens of thousands of other Christian groups, is the exclusive holder of all the God knowledge in the multiverse. Typically, and sadly, such hubris is locked down by their interpretation of the Bible on matters that they have made into self-defined boundaries over and despite the input of vast majority of the seven and a half billion other people on the planet.

I am going to address this in more detail next week—but this last week there was a small group of Christian leaders who issued a statement called “The Nashville Statement” without consulting the City of Nashville and asserting that anyone who doesn’t agree with their views was rejecting Christianity altogether, even if they claim otherwise.”²

4. The Apostle Paul of the New Testament dealt with groups like this in his time. Sometimes with not so nice words and even contradicting his teaching to always be gentle and patient!³ We can learn much from the humanity of Paul. And, we can learn from the way he challenged the Early Christian Church to grow up in the way they worked out their truths with one another. In his letter to the first century church in Ephesus he wrote:

¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/08/30/evangelical-leaders-release-nashville-statement-on-sexuality-rejecting-gay-marriage/?hpid=hp_hp-morning-mix_mm-evangelicals:homepage/story&tid=a_inl&utm_term=.0bbf2a3d42cc (accessed 9-2-17)

³ Galatians 5:12.

The key here is that “speaking the truth in love” is attached to growing in Christ-like-ness. The larger understanding of this text does not assumed that every Christian, or any individual segment of Christian religion, has Truth all figured out and then are to demand that everyone else conform to their specific version. No, this assumes that it is *while* we are speaking to one another in love and reaching for Truth, it is Christ who is the center point of our faith, and whom we are to imitate above all else, as God’s Truth to the human experience.⁴

Conclusion

It is challenging to live like Christ in the way we share our truth. Its much easier to just grab our truth gun and start shooting. Or, to simply hide and never tell our truth for risk we might be wrong, or get hurt in the process of working on Truth. Both of these paths are missed opportunities. And, today’s scriptures invite us to a better and more courageous path.

To review:

- First, be wise with the way we share our truth. Be a friend. Calibrate to the kind and quality of relationship that we have. Consider the timing of our exchange and create ways to frame our truth such that it opens up conversation rather than shutting it down.
- Next, be willing to learn from other people even if we fundamentally do not agree with someone else’s truth. By listening well, and being open to the reasons why people hold and defend their truth, we all remain open to further considerations as we move forward.

Prayer

God of love, justice, grace, beauty, and truth—help us to be bold in our pursuit of Truth and humble in the way we hold our truth. Jesus, you are our model and focal point. Spirit, we pray that you give us wisdom where we lack it, and courage at the moment we need it. God, Creator, Son, and Spirit—help us to hold one another accountable to the ethic of being honest and loving well.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Communion

1. The Christian practice of Holy Communion is quintessentially an experience of honest love in and through Jesus Christ. This Sacrament means many things, including the invitation that everyone is welcome to participate as we are, and in order to encounter the grace of God. It also is an opportunity to renew our commitment to living our lives like Christ who is the way, the Truth, and the life.
2. If Christian faith and community is new or unformed in your life--I want you to know that at First Covenant we are a grace-filled gathering of people who see ourselves as a family of equals,

⁴ John 14:6.

everyone humbly in need of grace. And, we are committed to a journey of generous and openhanded faith in which everyone is given safe space to journey toward Jesus Christ.

The act of becoming a Christ-follower is the convergence of God moving upon your heart and mind to become a Christ-follower...and you making the decision to believe that Jesus is the Incarnation of God, that he died, rose again, is here right now, and can and *does* forgive the sin and heal the brokenness in your life.

The result of such convergence is the greatest mystery of all—spiritual awakening to the presence of Christ dwelling in your soul through the presence of God’s Holy Spirit leading and guiding you for the rest of your life. And, a deep sense that you are completely loved and free to become your best self.

3. New to Christ or renewed in Christ we are *all* invited to the table of God where Christ invites all of us to eat and to drink.
 - At the point you are ready to receive communion I invite you to move into the two main isles and then return to your seats on the outer isles.
 - We have wooden bowls for the purpose of our monthly benevolence offering for those in our congregation who face special financial need.
 - We have gluten free crackers for those whose diets require that alternative.
 - There will be people here to pray with you if you have specific requests to be prayed for.
 - This is an extended time of refreshing that the worship leaders will guide us in.
4. Hear now, the invitation of Jesus to this banquet table of mercy. Jesus said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim Jesus Christ until he comes again.⁵

Please pray with me

5. God we are here today because of your relentless and grace-filled pursuit of us. We revel in your embrace. We delight in how you create a sense of family and community that honors all that we are and yet transcends our differences with bonds forged through grace and held because of love.

Meet us here. Speak to us now. As we eat and drink these elements, fill us with your presence and renew our souls. In Jesus name, amen.

Benediction

As the new week begins, may we earnestly work on capital T truth and communicate our personal truth wisely, and be receptive to learning from the truth of others such that more of our conversations lead to transformation and Christ-like love.

Go in Peace. Amen.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26