

To Tell the Truth

“To Tell the Truth”

Ephesians 4:1-16

Acts 10:9-19

Once again, I'd like to take the opportunity to say how grateful we are that you folks at Morningside have welcomed us so warmly into your midst and have allowed us to share your facility. Many of you probably know that we are a congregation in formation with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I'd like to tell you a few things about us. Probably the most important characteristic of the Disciples of Christ is that we have only one article of faith. It is that we believe that Jesus is Christ, the Son of the Living God, Lord and Savior of the world. By design, we try to avoid tests of fellowship; we have a long history of emphasizing the importance of Christian unity. In fact, our founders had an interesting approach to the idea of the unity of the church; they believed that the church was already unified, whether they knew it or not; “The church of Christ is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one, consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things....” In other words, it's just like it says in Ephesians 4:4-6: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

Sometimes we forget we're all on the same team. Sometimes, Christian people make errors in judgment that lead them, without meaning to, into the mistaken position that my congregation is in competition with that other congregation for members, or for donors, or for resources, or for position in the community. Sometimes Christian people look at other Christian people and

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believe, somehow, that the way we govern our organizations, or the way we order our worship, or the way we understand politics, or the way we approach social issues makes us the real Christians, and everyone else mere imitations.

Simon Peter was brought up to understand that there were some things a person just didn't do. He had been taught all his life to observe the law, and of course, by this we mean the Law of Moses, the Jewish law, the set of instructions that spelled out in great detail what a Jewish person may do, what he may eat, and how he should act. Simon's upbringing was probably fairly strict. The very idea of eating foods that were considered ritually unclean was appalling to him.

Imagine his surprise, then, when one day, while waiting for his lunch, he falls asleep and has an astonishing vision: He saw the sky opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

If you know the story, you know that this was God's way of teaching Peter not to write off certain people as unworthy, or undeserving. God had sent a message to Cornelius, telling him to send for Simon Peter, and God send a message to Simon Peter, telling him that he should go with the men Cornelius sent. Peter finally figures out the larger message from God, and says this: "Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality,

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but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

It's important to remember that Cornelius wasn't a Christian. He wasn't even Jewish. He was, however, someone who loved God. What Simon Peter discovered was that God wasn't expecting him to point out any of Cornelius's shortcomings, but rather to express to Cornelius the good news about Jesus.

I want to suggest that Christian unity begins with the concept of human unity. Every human being is a child of God. Everyone born on this planet is a child of God, someone God loves and desires a relationship with. It doesn't really matter very much how those people feel about God; it makes things easier and quicker if they love God in return, but a human being's refusal to love God does not stop God from loving that human being. In practice, it appears that God never forces anyone to become a Christian against his or her will, but that does not mean that God's love for that person is in any way lessened, curtailed, truncated or modified. Good thing, too; we have all had our moments when our own love for God wouldn't pass the test.

Maybe you remember the old television game show, "To Tell the Truth." Three people would sit before a panel of players, and one of them would be sworn to tell the truth, and the other two were imposters, and allowed to lie their heads off. The panel would ask them all questions, and then they'd have to guess which one was the genuine article based on the answers.

Sometimes I think this must be something like the experience of people who are outside the church looking in; there are all these groups claiming to be genuine Christians, and the folks out there have to decide which groups are the imposters and which ones are telling the truth. The problem is, we're all

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imposters at one time or another. We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We've all done things and said things that don't reflect well on our savior; we've all made mistakes and we've all had occasion to deliberately run the other way when we've heard God's call. And to make things even more complicated, each of these groups believes it's telling the truth. Each one thinks it has figured out the answers.

As sad as it is that people outside the church can't tell the players without a program, perhaps it's even more sad that sometimes people inside the church think they *can*. Maybe that's why Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, speaks so movingly about the virtue of humility: "...lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called," he writes, "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." Sometimes it seems to me that the witness of the church isn't always humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance. Sometimes it seems to be pride, coarseness, impatience and contentiousness.

Some of the rudest people I've ever met excuse their rudeness by saying they're just honest. It makes me think of something once written by Warren Wiersbe: "Truth without love is brutality, and love without truth is hypocrisy." Telling the truth has to be as much about caring for the people we're talking to as it is about knowing the right answers.

It's human nature, I suppose, but the Bible is quite clear in this passage and in others that if ever we believe that we have finished growing into the image of Christ, it's a sure sign that we have a long way yet to go. I think this is, at least in part, what Paul means in the previous chapter when he says, "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into

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Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted 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." We're required to tell the truth, even if the best we can do is to tell the truth as we understand it; the key is to tell the truth in love, to understand that the people we're telling it to, whether they're inside the church or outside the church, are people God loves, and whom we are also called to love. What would our conversations be like if we could, every time, remember that the person we're speaking to is someone Jesus gave his life for? What if we could talk to this person as though we knew that the result of this moment might be not merely his or her salvation, but the salvation of someone else, someone they may talk to months or years from now?

If we can remember how much God loves each and every one, maybe then we can fulfill our calling as the Church to tell the truth.