

BAND TOGETHER - SPEAKING TRUTH
Lent

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

A Sermon Preached by
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Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists

As we seek to respond to your word and will, and encourage one another in the growth of our minds and spirits, let us hear this morning's scripture from Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2.

Ephesians 4:25–5:2¹

4:²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸ Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up,^[a] as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.¹

5:¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Pastor Amy Roon

Please pray with me.

God,
Be in our heads,
Be in our hearts,
Be in our understanding.
Be in the words spoken and the words heard.
-- Amen

And like so many of the letters of Paul or, as this one is, a letter ascribed to Paul, **the letter to the Ephesians is full of contradictions.** It would be and is, as some preachers choose to do, much easier

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

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to only preach from just one of the verses and just not read any of the rest or sometimes even only one-*half* of the verse.

Be angry but do not sin.

Wow! What an important note in the context of community and speaking the truth – that we can *separate the emotion of anger from the morality of sin*, that being angry in and of itself is not what separates us from God and perhaps might even be expected when someone is speaking a truth. Of course, then the rest of the passage spent quite a bit of time telling us how to put away anger – and that sounds pretty good, too. This happens because the author is not writing to one person and, in the case of this letter, not even regarding just one particular situation. This letter is to a community of people instructing them on *how to live lives as new Christians*. It's really more of a sermon.

And I'll tell you a secret. As we preach, one of the fastest ways to stray off our point or contradict ourselves is to look up and notice you all as individuals. We make some *strong* point that felt wonderful in the writing or the thinking about it in general and the validity of anger in the life of community, only to look up and notice someone who needs no encouragement, ... and quickly pivoted to how important it is to speak the truth with a cool head, putting away anger. We make some other strong point about speaking the truth and look up and see someone who is in deep denial and not listening to the truth.

Band together. Center yourselves in community. This is no easy task for a collection of individuals. All of us with different needs and responses and reactions trying to figure out how we might take the same piece of advice about following in the ways of Jesus and not just argue and fight about it. But it is in community in that place of compromise, of listening, of being heard is where we experience the love of God even as we experience all the trials of being human.

It's been a painful week of truths. We have witnessed mass killings in this country and an epidemic of white supremacy and insisted each one is mere coincidence, a unique evil of an individual gone mad.

We have witnessed the election of a racist, xenophobic man to the highest office in our government allowing him a megaphone normalizing white supremacist groups in ways our country has not seen in decades, thinking this is just our American problem.

Failing to address and admonish white supremacy has cost so, so many lives. And this should not be a difficult truth to say – except that *we have taught one another to lie*.

We've taught one another that our comfort in being a community together is more important than saying the truth. Most of us were not *consciously* taught to lie. We didn't know the truth and so repeat lives of racism and sexism, of anti-Semitism, of homophobia and xenophobia, of Islamophobia. And these lies get so embedded in the fabric of our society that to merely pull and tug on a string of truth can be seen as an upset and a threat, can be seen as anger and disruption.

One way to wrap our minds around how these evils work is to realize they are like toxins in the air we breathe and in the water all around us. None of us in our permeable, interrelating bodies can be free from it individually. If there is one way that I ever could understand an atonement theology – an idea that there is something that we don't know how to do and we need a savior to come, and fix it

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collectively for all of us – it would be this. *Our task* is to do what we can to clean the water around us: the air of white supremacy that has polluted our culture, our ways of being, our habits, our subconscious. And to do this we must be willing to tell each other the truth.

We must be a community and a congregation where the truth can be told. And that means *listening* through disruption, through discomforts, through anger, through tears, through pain. It means listening with compassion when someone else is speaking with the voice of anger and pain and truth. And it's not without the possibility of laughter – the ways that we bind ourselves together and noticing the foolishness of our ways. We are living in a time of unprecedented lies, of "alternative facts", of truthiness and distortion of opinion accepted as evidence. And we cannot have real discourse if we cannot tell truth from lies. The fact that we can't tell easily what is being presented to us as the truth or a lie makes our whole way of being a fun house of mirrors. We can't tell what we're looking at anymore. We can't trust in someone else's response; and without that trust we cannot be centered in community. Like we heard last week, the clay on the wheel it has to be centered or the whole pot will fold in upon itself. That is what living in a distorted place of lies does to a community. Do you know what I mean?

We do so many different projects in this congregation! Since I came here nearly 10 years ago now. (I'm just *now* not the new one. Right? Stick around long enough you won't be new forever.²)
[Laughter.]

I remember the very first leadership retreat. I probably had been here for about four weeks and we were ... You had all come. There were a whole bunch of goals and [how to] try to measure whether we did those goals and looking at all of the things, trying to understand all of the different ministries of this church. And I heard over and over again,

"Well, we do so much, but what is our one goal?"

"What should be the one thing we tell people?"

Or

"What should *we* as a church be known for?"

"If we're doing so many things that is our *whole* thing?"

To which I have often said,

"Well, following the Jesus Way and teaching it to others is sort of the general mandate of the church." [Laughter.]

It's not that we don't have a goal. Right?

The fact is that this congregation is and has been a beacon and a place of sanctuary for integrity and accountability. This congregation has welcomed and been a part of many, many people who have come here hurting, who have come here hurting from another institution or church where they couldn't feel heard or the lies were distorted. It is no small thing to be a healthy organization that *speaks the truth to one another*, that figures out *how to get angry* every once in a while, *to sit through that*, *to live through that*, *to still talk to each other afterwards*; *to have multiple goals and*

² Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz, here for 25 years, has left and bridge minister Pastor Todd Smiedendorf has just arrived.

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*feel like were going nowhere and still stay together and find another goal and try again.*³ **To do this work of being a community together in truth is no small thing.**

In a world where trust and truth are increasingly hard to find, what I value most in this place is its integrity – not because we've always done the right thing, but because we have been willing to tell the truth and hear the truth when we were wrong. To be a place where truth is told and trust is cultivated in a time of unprecedented lies is what it means to band together. It's what it means to hear that message to the Ephesians as another congregation 2000 years later still struggling to figure out what it means to be following in the Jesus way, to be a new Christian community together. Let us be so, as followers of Christ. – Amen

UCUCC: AR

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³ Italics and boldface added by editor.