

I

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to Jerusalem. As our group stood on a high point overlooking the city, I spotted a building on the horizon, and I turned to our local guide and said, “What’s that over yonder?”

And our guide, who has led English-speaking groups from all over the world, looked at me quizzically and said, “Yonder? Yonder? I do not know this word Yonder. What is yonder?”

I quickly explained that it’s American Southern “over there.” As in, not here, but yonder.

II

Whether we mean for it to or not, the way in which we speak reveals something about us, doesn’t it? And this isn’t just about accents or idioms or regional dialects. How and when we speak often reveals as much or more about us as the words themselves.

And that’s a timeless truth that the writer of Ephesians brings before us this morning.

III

We’re continuing our summer sermon series this morning with our read through the Book of Ephesians. As we’ve said all along, isn’t a book at all in the traditional sense of the word, but rather a letter, written to the followers of Jesus who lived in and around the city of Ephesus sometime in the late first century.

We’re picking up just past the midpoint of the letter this morning, but before we dive in today’s text, a few reminders are in order.

Most, if not all, of the followers of Jesus in Ephesus to whom this letter is addressed were Gentiles. That is, they were women and men who were raised outside of first century Judaism. But nevertheless, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they too were coming to believe that this Galilean Jew named Jesus of Nazareth was not just another prophet, not just another moral teacher, not just another revolutionary, but that Jesus was and is the Christ – the Messiah – the one to whom the Hebrew Scriptures point, the one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny are somehow tied together.

Most of their friends and neighbors in Ephesus worshiped Greek or Roman gods. In fact, one of the wonders of the ancient world right there in Ephesus was an enormous statue of Artemis, the Greek goddess of fertility.

So the followers of Jesus to whom this letter is addressed were a minority among their peers. And so much of the first half of the letter is concerned with issues of their religious identity. The writer reminds the Ephesians that once, they were a people cut off from God and without hope, but in Christ, God has adopted them and reconciled them to God and to one another. Most of the first half of the letter is centered on what God has done for the Ephesians, and by extension, for us.

As we come to the midpoint of the letter today, the content shifts – from what God has done for us in Jesus Christ – to what we should do and how we should live in response. So listen now for a Word from God from Ephesians 4:1-16.

4 I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷ But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore 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^[a] into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until 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. ¹⁴ We 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. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The people of Ephesus lived in a time when life was far too often short, cheap, and brutal. They lived in a time of great upheaval and violence and confusion. They lived in a time when might makes right and nice guys finish last and he who dies with the most toys wins seemed to be the only way to survive.

And so the writer of Ephesus reminds them about who and whose they are. But speaking the truth in love, he writes we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

IV

I've said it before and I'll say it again. The very fact that you're here this morning makes you a minority among your peers. The very fact that any of you are here *at all* is a gift. There were so many other things you could have been doing with this time this morning. You could have gone to breakfast. You could have worked in the yard. You could have run errands. You could have slept in. And not one person, not a one, would have thought any less of you if you did.

But you're here. You're there. You've come to this place and time, among this community. Maybe you're here for the first time. Maybe you're here for the thousandth time. Maybe you're here because you're visiting grandma and she insisted that you're coming with her, and you know better than to argue with grandma.

But the reality is, you're here, you're part of this community in this place at this time, because God has called you here.

God has called you because God's love for you is far beyond your or my ability to

comprehend. You are God's beloved, not because of anything you've said or not said, not because of anything you've done or not done, but because of what God has done for you in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. As the writer of Ephesians reminds us, once you were cut off from God and without hope, but in Jesus, you have been claimed and marked and adopted as God's own forever and ever, and there is nothing that can ever take that away. You belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to yourself, but to your faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

You can't earn God's favor. You already have it. So the question is, what are you going to do about it? How are you going to live in light of that good news?

V

And wow are we going to live in light of that good news?

The writer of Ephesians implores us, but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way.

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up.

Speaking the truth in love.

Truth and love.

We live in an era in which the world around us seems to have a fuzzy relationship with a word like truth. In recent years, we have come to learn words like "misinformation" and "disinformation" and "gaslighting" and the like. Mark Twain once quipped that a lie can race halfway around the world before the truth has its shoes tied,

and these days, anybody with a cell phone can broadcast in real time to a global audience, and basic fact-checking and common sense often take a back seat to "going viral." Some years ago, a late-night comic coined the word, "truthiness." We seem to live in an era where "truthiness" is close enough.

But as people of faith, we are followers of Jesus Christ, who himself makes some profound claims about "truth." Jesus told his followers, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." When one of his followers said, "Jesus, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" He answered, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

And so as people of faith in Jesus, we claim that despite what the rest of the world may say, there is, in fact, such thing as objective truth, truth that is independent of our feelings or what is most popular or expedient or trending at any given moment.

Allow me to illustrate. According to my compass, north is that way. North was that way long before you and I were ever born, and it will still be north long after you and I are gone. North is not influenced by our feelings or by what is trending on social media or any other factor. This way, not just any way, is north.

Now save your e-mails about how if you stand on the exact south pole, any way you point is north. And save your e-mails about magnetic declension and magnetic north versus true north.

It's an illustration – a parable, if you will, an example that points beyond itself to a larger truth. If you want to walk to Canada, this is the way. But more

importantly, there is an objective truth in the universe that is independent of human motives or designs.

As people of faith, we claim that the fixed point in the universe is God. As Christians, we claim that Jesus is not just another prophet pointing us toward God, but that Jesus is God incarnate, God in the flesh, God with us. And we come to know Jesus and his will for our lives through God's revelation given to us in Scripture.

In other words, this is our compass. In a world that is confusing and loud and that often seems like it's about to spin out of control, this is gives us our bearing. In a world filled with noise and nonsense, the writer of Ephesians implores us to speak the truth in love.

In love.

That little two-word prepositional phrase, in love, is doing quite a bit of heavy lifting in this text. As you may know, in the Greek language in which this letter was composed, there are at least three words for the English word love. There's a word for romantic love, and a word for brotherly love, and then there's the word that appears here. The kind of love the writer calls us to is the kind of love modeled for us in the life of Jesus Christ. The kind of love that involves self-denial and cross-bearing. The kind of love that lays down power and privilege and picks up a towel and washes dirty feet. The kind of love that seeks to serve, rather than to be served.

For us as people of faith, when we speak, truth and love must always go hand in hand. We can speak truth, but if we do it without the self-emptying love of Christ, as

the Apostle Paul says, it's just a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.

But on the other side of the coin, we must be people of faith who are mature enough to speak the truth, even when it's uncomfortable or risky. We might think the loving thing to do is just to keep silent. After all, if you don't have anything nice to say, then don't say anything at all, the saying goes. Better to go along to get along, they say. Don't rock the boat and such.

But keeping silent in the face of falsehood is neither truthful nor loving. Keeping silent in the face of injustice is not living as those worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

As a preacher warned another generation many years ago, "It may be that we have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words of the bad people, or for the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people."

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way.

Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up.

Speaking the truth.

In love.

That is the way of Christ. And that is the way for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.