

“Live out Love”
Rev. Joseph J. Clifford, D. Min.
Text: Ephesians 4:25-5:2
Myers Park Presbyterian Church
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“Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” That’s Paul’s counsel to the church in Ephesus. I never cease to be amazed at the relevance of God’s word to our contemporary world. Almost 2,000 years after they were originally penned, the power of Paul’s words speak across the millennia. Put away falsehood. Speak the truth to our neighbors. Amen.

The challenge comes in defining the truth. What is the truth these days? Who gets to define it? For my generation and older, remember when Walter Cronkite used to end the CBS Evening News with, “And that’s the way it is,” and by golly it was. Today, half of America would respond, “No it’s not. That’s fake news.” They’d change the channel and find another news personality to tell them the way it really is, and confirm what they already believe about the world.

Of course, Cronkite’s version of the way it was had its own bias, it just wasn’t as obvious as today’s media outlets. How they chose the stories they reported, and those they did not, how they worded the presentation of the story, who was interviewed, who was not—all these factors shaped Cronkite’s version of the way it was. Today we are just more aware of those biases. Our awareness has had a tragic impact on truth.

In 2018, The Rand Corporation published a research paper entitled, “Truth Decay.”¹ The report defined “Truth Decay” as “the diminishing role of facts and data in American public life.” Four trends characterize Truth Decay:

1. Increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data
2. A blurring of the line between opinion and fact
3. The increasing relative volume and resulting influence of opinion and personal experience over fact
4. Declining trust in formerly respected sources of facts

What are the main forces driving this “Truth Decay?” **Cognitive biases** play a huge role. We seek analysis that confirms what we already believe. And we tend to weigh our opinions on personal experience rather than data or facts about an issue. The **rise of social media and other changes to the information environment** also drive “Truth Decay.” Social media provides for the wide dissemination of disinformation, or misleading or biased information. The 24/7 news cycle requires a blending of opinion with news that conflates the two. **Competing demands and fiscal constraints on the educational system** have reduced the emphasis on civic education, media literacy, and critical thinking. There’s nothing on a standardized test to measure this, and so we no longer teach it. Finally, **political, sociodemographic, and economic polarization** contributes both to increasing disagreement regarding facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data and to the blurring of the line between opinion and fact by creating opposing sides, each with its own worldview. The groups on each side become insular in

¹ Kavanagh, Jennifer and Michael D. Rich, Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018.
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2314.html. Also available in print form.

their thinking and communication, creating a closed environment in which false information proliferates.²

This isn't the first time in our nation's history we've experienced "Truth Decay." Previous eras also experienced a decline in trust in institutions. In the Gilded Age of the 1880's and 90's, "yellow journalism" led to a mistrust of newspapers seeking to expand their circulation. In the Great Depression, distrust of banks and financial institutions certainly grew in the 1920s–1930s. Social upheaval of the 1960s–1970s, along with Watergate and the Pentagon Papers, left many questioning the veracity of government. According to Rand's report, "Today, however, we see that lack of trust across the board—in government, media, and financial institutions—and a far lower absolute level of trust in these institutions than in previous eras."³ We could add religious institutions to that list. We are certainly experiencing an unprecedented lack of trust, or any acknowledgement of authority beyond an individual's opinion.

Put away falsehood; let all of us speak truth to our neighbors." In 2020, easier said than done, Paul. How can we pull this off?

Perhaps a way forward is found in what follows Paul's admonition. Why are we to put away falsehood? What drives his call to speak truth to our neighbors? "We are members of one another." Put another way, we're all part of the same body. This is what Paul's been saying throughout his letter to the Ephesians. We are one. We have been reconciled to God in Christ. In him, we are united. So live like it. Part of living like it is to speak the truth to our neighbors. Part of living like it is to put away falsehoods that might sound good to us on the surface but have no basis in fact. Ultimately, the lies we tell ourselves and one another hurt us, because they hurt the whole, not just the part of the whole we don't like.

It is important to remember Paul is speaking not to Roman society in general, but to the church in Ephesus in particular. However, his words to the church then certainly offer truth and challenge to the church now. And ultimately, his words speak the truth not only about the church, but also about the world. If God is in fact above us all and through us all and in us all, then ultimately, we are one, whether we like it or not. And in order to face the challenges of our time, we need to speak truth to each other, for we are members of one another. We're all in the same boat. Drilling a hole in my adversary's side of the boat means we're all going to drown. That was true for the church in Ephesus in the first century, and it's true for us here in the 21st century.

New Testament Scholar, Brian Petersen, puts it this way, "The church ought to be the place where the truth can be spoken: the difficult truths about our world and about ourselves, and the gracious truth about the God who has redeemed us. We are, however, rather skilled in using a self-justifying excuse of 'speaking the truth' as a cover for our efforts to manipulate, retaliate, and tear down others. All such behavior is simply a lie masquerading as the truth."⁴

The implications of our essential unity continue to unfold in the passage as Paul challenges thieves to stop stealing, but rather to work honestly with their own hands. Why? So that they can be generous

² "Truth Decay," pp. xiv-xv.

³ Ibid, p. xii.

⁴ Brian Peterson, "Commentary on Ephesians 4:25-5:2 in "Working Preacher." See: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2547

and help those in need! What an amazing motivation for work. Not simply to support yourself, but to be able to contribute something to the community. Why? Because we're all in the same boat. We are one. Contributing to the needs of another benefits us all.

Paul continues, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up." Our grandmother's put it another way, "If you don't have anything kind to say, don't say anything at all!" Why? Because when you tear down another, you hurt us all, because we're all in the same boat. We are one.

"Put away bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and malice." Why? Because that poisons not just the one it's directed at, but the whole pie; not just a part, but the whole. So, "be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another." Why? Because God in Christ has forgiven you. So forgive each other. Move forward together.

Paul summarizes all these exhortations with a simple command: Live in love. Why? Because Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, for all of us. So imitate God, give of yourselves in love for one another. Ultimately, love is the measure of all truth, for love is the deepest truth of life.

Lately, I've been quoting Richard Rohr a lot. His daily devotionals have really struck a chord with me. This past week his focus has been the transforming power of love. On Tuesday, who spoke of love as our deepest identity.⁵ He writes:

"When we live out of this truth of love, instead of the lie and human emotion of fear, we will at last begin to live. Love is always letting go of a fear, (letting go of that lie.) ... The world will always teach us fear. Jesus will always command us to love."

In a world where fear too often drives falsehoods, where facts intermingle with opinions in ways that leave truth hard to discern, our call is to live out love; love for one another, love for the other with whom we disagree, love for God in whom we are all one, for love is the deepest truth we can possibly know. Amen.

⁵ Richard Rohr. "Love is our Deepest Identity," on Tuesday, November 10, 2020. Cited here: https://cac.org/love-is-our-deepest-identity-2020-11-10/?utm_source=cm&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=dm&utm_content=summary