

Homily for Mid-Week Evening Prayer Week V 2019
What's love got to do with truth and casting out fear?

Two men lived who lived in a small village got into a terrible dispute that they could not resolve.
So they decided to talk to the town sage.
The first man went to the sage's home and told his version of what happened.
When he finished, the sage said, "You're absolutely right."
The next night, the second man called on the sage and told his side of the story.
The sage responded, "You're absolutely right."
Afterward, the sage's wife scolded her husband.
"Those men told you two different stories and you told them they were absolutely right.
That's impossible—they can't both be absolutely right."
The sage turned to his wife and said,
"You're absolutely right."

Some people really like to avoid conflict!
Perhaps it's a good thing that most of us do,
especially since we don't usually do it very well.
Nevertheless, conflict is a fact of life.
Many have made the point that conflict,
even within the church, is a sign of life—
evidence of the fact that people really care.
My grandmother used to say this about
a married couple who swore they never had a fight:
"Well, either one of them is lying,
or one of them is not paying attention."

Avoiding confrontation is often a recipe for even greater conflict and pain. Yet, as we just heard in the letter to the Ephesians, speaking our truth in times of conflict has the mandate that we speak truth “in love.” What the writer of that letter was getting at is that we don’t speak words of confrontation merely to strike out in anger or hurt, no matter how righteous our cause. We speak truth for “the good of the other” and/or the greater good of the whole community.

Though we fear confrontation, yet without it, wounds fester. So how do we begin the process of healing by confronting an issue? Well, one of the most important cautions I can offer is to take time to think through what you think the problem is. Make sure that you have prayed and even searched the scriptures to be sure you are not seeking a confrontation that is simply a matter of personal preference. Above all, we need to be sure we are not the one arguing for the law over and against grace. Where there are issues that aren’t really sin, it’s time to pray and ask God to change our hearts. It’s time for God to show us a way to be a good teacher, an example to others whose difference from us causes a problem.

To speak the truth in love, we begin by speaking the truth to ourselves— Because the truth is a two-edged sword and we need to always keep in mind that every one of us has fallen short of the glory of God.

As we have heard so often as part of our confession of sin on Sunday mornings:

*if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,
and the truth is not in us.*

To speak the truth in love requires humility
and a willingness to hear the truth about ourselves.

From the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus,
we see that *truth aims at love*
and *love aims at the truth*.

Love shapes how we speak the truth,
and the truth shapes how we show love.

So, confrontation with the truth,
in a spirit of humility, prayer,
and love does not seek to divide,
but seeks repentance, reconciliation, and unity—
both within ourselves and between us and our neighbors.

As we end this Lenten series on what love has to do
with anything and everything,
the question now is what measure of love
are willing to extend to one another?

One story I have heard that continues to haunt me
is about what a woman named Mary Johnson
has been able to do within her lifetime
to speak truth in unconditional love through forgiveness.

In February 1993, a 16-year-old shot and killed
her only son after an argument at a party
in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Twelve years after her son's death,
Mary went to the prison to visit her son's murderer, Oshea Israel.
She wanted to share with him
what the death of her son did to her, how it hurt her.

As she spoke, the murderer, Oshea, began to weep.
The victim's mother, Mary,
said that he became human to her in that moment.
And, if you can believe it (!), she hugged him.
Instantly she said that she knew all the animosity and anger
that had held her bound for 12 years had been lifted from her;
she had totally forgiven him.
Three years later, Oshea was released from prison.
Today, (again if you can believe it),
they live next door to each other.
Mary founded *From Death to Life*,
an organization that supports mothers
who have lost children to homicide,
and encourages forgiveness between families of victims
and murderers and their families.
Together Mary and Oshea are part of something called
"The Forgiveness Project"—
[Now there's a great mission statement for a church (just saying!).]
In speaking the truth to Oshea—
in love, willing the good for him as well as herself—
Mary changed Oshea's life and her own.
It's just as we discovered last week
when we considered what love has to do with us
and our "enemies."
We don't heal in order to forgive,
we forgive in order to heal.

What could possibly compel such acts of love and care
in one of the most unimaginable circumstances of life?
A mother mourning the loss of her son
embraces the one who caused all her pain
and so much loss.

Where do each of us fall within the limits and limitlessness of
God's love—God's will for the good?

The first letter of John tells us:

This is how we know what love is:

Christ laid down his life for us.

And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

In other words, if we have no pity for others,
how can the love of God be in us?

And so, the letter of John continues to admonish and encourage us:

*Dear children, let us not love with words or speech
but with actions and in truth.*

Because God's love is active—

it comes to us, yes, in his word to us,

but also through creation,

and through every person we interact with.

As we learned from Fred Rogers,

the neighborhood is everywhere.

We do well to remember that

God's love reaches far beyond the depths of human emotions

and demands a deeper effort of placing ourselves aside

for a greater message and the good of all—

the gospel in word and in deed.

Yet we know we are incapable of reaching

this level of compassion without the activity of the Holy Spirit

in our hearts and minds.

Our sinful nature disables us

from being able to reach such levels of care on our own.

It is the Spirit's guidance and the gifts of the Spirit living within us

that enables us to offer love in word and in action.

Because the love of Christ

is to define us and all our relationships

so that we are not pulled about by the storms

of our sensibilities, our emotions and circumstances.

The world tells us to hate those that offend us
and to desire the worse for those that harm us.
The world encourages us to seek revenge.
God's love, however, is the complete opposite.
Right in the middle of the book of the law par excellence,
that is the book of Leviticus, we read:
*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone
among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.*
And so, as we have come to learn, love is a matter of choice.
We can choose to love as God intends and requires us to,
or we can choose not to.
That is what our Christian freedom is all about,
to do the difficult work of love that is contrary to the world.

So, what's love got to do with it all?
Love is the impetus,
the driving force in achieving the unimaginable.
Love is a closer walk with the Creator of all things.
Love is the compelling force that says
through the mercy and steadfast love of God,
we are empowered to extend that same love to one another.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.
Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the
world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*
Love is our saving grace.
Not the superficial love of the world,
but the sacrificial, self-giving love of the Cross.

Throughout our lives as Christians, we stand beneath the Cross
where we are humbled to realize by faith that
we have been embraced and forgiven
by the Father whose only Son
was put to death by our sin.

This is the truth we all need to hear and to know
in order that we might be saved and have eternal life.

We stand beneath the Cross and realize that
without the love of God for each of us,
how would we ever be able to know what love is,
let alone be able to truly love others?

So here is my benediction for all of us
as we prepare to enter Holy Week:
May our days be blessed with opportunities
to show the love of God to others
in whatever way you and I are able.
May any obstacles and barriers to living our faith active in love
be removed through the power of prayer
and our sincere attentiveness to our baptismal calling.
May God's mercy and grace be a sustaining force
as we seek to live out Christ's commandment to us—
to love one another just as he loved us.
If we do, then we, the church, will be known as his disciples.
So, beloved, have love for one another.