



## Speaking and Receiving the Truth in Love

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost || August 11, 2024 || 9:30 am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, Massachusetts || Proper 14B || 1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

I hope that you are finding some time to enjoy this summer, with the change in weather and schedule offered in June, July and August. I have always appreciated that our liturgical calendar, is for the most part, free of festivals and feast days in these three fleeting months. It allows us to accept the invitation for us is to practice what Jesus preached and to work on those counter cultural concepts of loving our neighbors; having no enemies, examining and dispelling prejudices and preconceived notions so that we can love extravagantly and generously, as Christ loves us.

Perhaps it is obvious when I suggest that these crucial concepts **require** practice. Loving someone who cuts me off in traffic, with bumper stickers that fundamentally offend me, takes effort.

Listening with LOVE to someone who maligns a particular group of people as being ALL one thing – takes energy and practice to say, “hang on a minute” or “actually, I can’t agree with you because while there may be heaps of (fill in the group) Irish immigrants who.....whatever the stereotype offered is, I’m positive there are others who would not, do or say or behave in that way”. When the inevitable retort of “yes, of course, but you know what I mean” is offered as a rationalization comes – it can be draining to verbalize the “yes, and I’m asking you to understand *what I mean....*” I’ll refer to this verbal volleying

as “Argument Twister” (A reference to the popular party game, not the disaster movie series!).

Standing in the way of prejudice, or correcting misperceptions, is not a delightful endeavor in the summer, but it is what Paul is reminding the Ephesians, and each of us to do - (Last week’s portion of Paul’s letter was to “speak truth in love” which means offering the required correction with love in your heart and kindness in your tone -- and this week we have “be imitators of God”, which requires bottomless patience, love and empathy for the one who is

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mistaken.) When we make these gentle and risky corrections, we do so in love, not as one-upsmanship, or demonstrating our own superiority or smarty-pantsedness but in love for our neighbor and the world which is made smaller and more limited by pigeonholes and stereotypes.

It is hard to speak only the truth, to offer loving corrections, yet it may be far more difficult to be the recipient of those loving corrections; to be the neighbor who generously accepts the amendment made to our assumptions. It is harder because it requires self-reflection, acknowledgement of error and the potential modification of our own beliefs or behaviors.

This morning we heard this familiar dynamic from John's gospel. We have the leaders around Jesus offering ad-homonym attacks against him and his teachings. Jesus is in the middle of another Bread lesson using the sustenance of bread to highlight the divine nourishment and eternal life that comes from Jesus as the bread of life. He reminds people about God's promises, expectations and the miraculous gifts that come with believing. The crowd's retort is – "Hey, isn't this Joseph's son?" "We know his Grandparents, AND his parents. He took lessons with my kids – he wasn't that great a student or runner, and I watched him back-talk his mother." "Why should we listen to the carpenter's son - someone we know so well?"

Such a HUMAN response! Rather than grappling with the challenging and consistent messages Jesus is sending about himself and the world, it is just easier to criticize or question the messenger. They have to change and consider that Jesus has wisdom and lessons beyond what would expect of the carpenter's son worth listening to, working on and emulating.

Our national history offers plenty of these lessons. Groups being discounted or truths being dismissed. Ten years ago, on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014 an 18 year old named Michael Brown was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri by a Police Officer named Darren Wilson – and after multiple news cycles that insinuated that Michael had been stealing or committing crime before his death, we finally heard from his heartbroken mother, his family and members of the community. We heard that Michael had graduated from high school the week before he died. We heard that he had been an aspiring singer and rap artist. We were invited to a more complete picture of Michael, the crushing poverty in Ferguson, and the deep-seated distrust and gulf between the police and the surrounding residents.

In the ensuing years, after detailed and in-depth federal, state and local investigations, Officer Wilson was cleared of a variety of charges that were expected to be made in what we must all agree was a wrongful death. The confusion and chaos that surrounded this incident was found to be much as the officer initially described it. But this incident changed millions of hearts and minds about the ways in which we understand the complexities of policing and the dangers faced by young people and police. It also encouraged dozens of people to run for public office.

Darren Wilson had neighbors who couldn't imagine him unnecessarily taking the life of a teenager, and Michael Brown had neighbors who expected him to fulfill his potential as he had already overcome some of the hurdles that had hamstrung others.

As people of God, we are required to be open to God's surprising possibilities, unlikely messengers and God's surrogates who upend our preconceived notions. We must be available to better understand God's call to each of us when these insights are offered. Ours is not an easy path – it is easier just to dismiss the messenger or discount the conduit rather than questioning our firmly held beliefs. It would have been easier to think of Ferguson, Missouri in strictly black and white – as a binary set of circumstances that led to tragedy. The truth is more difficult – the facts are more complex. Our understanding requires more time because the reality is more interesting, challenging and nuanced.

This week we hosted 47 guests and members of the staff from Rosie's Place, the first women's shelter in the country, founded in 1974 to provide a nurturing environment for poor and homeless women. Guests ranged in age, nationality, origin, identity and each has her own story and set of circumstances that brought her to Rosie's. On Thursday what they shared in common was that they were generously and lovingly welcomed to St. Andrew's, offered respite and restoration at Hummarock Beach and a shopping and picnic opportunity that they had looked forward to all year.

On Thursday, I met longtime parishioners who described themselves as having a heart for this ministry or a decades' long history with this particular event. Each of the St. Andrew's participants was offered the opportunity to better understand the complexities of homelessness, the faces and lived histories of women who were urged to be kind to one another, were treated with dignity and compassion by a group of remarkable volunteers who were spending some valuable summer hours practicing what Jesus preached. We were each invited to be tenderhearted, forgiving and enthusiastic imitators of God, living in Love, and hoping that the love that we shared will grow exponentially between this year's Rosie's outing and the next. I hope that much more will be shared and written about this remarkable day and the challenging investment of time and energy that created this week's success. As a people called upon to imitate God, Thursday was a knockout!

Amen+