

“Living Love”

John 6:35, 41-51, Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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Lynne M. Dolan

I was driving in my car a few weeks ago when I heard an interesting conversation. It was Saturday morning and I was listening to the quiz show, “Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me” on WNPR. I so appreciate a program that not only covers current events, but also does it with a dose of humor. Given what happens in our world in any given week, we could all use a little humor. On this particular day, the guest being quizzed was Senator Borak Obama from Illinois. Before he actually took the quiz, he chatted a while with the host, Peter Sagel.

Senator Obama admitted to recently condemning the practice of throwing lavish parties for students “graduating” from the eighth grade. While he had nothing against congratulating students for a job well done, he found the practice of calling it a “graduation” a bit troublesome. In a community where far too many African American students drop out of high school before they “graduate,” he thought elevating what happens at the end of eighth grade to the status of “graduation” may lead some students to diminish the importance of actually graduating from high school. Senator Obama lamented that kids today think a party is necessary for merely doing what is expected of them. When we were young, our parents congratulated us on completing the eighth grade and got us ready to begin high school, sans the extravaganza. In other words, no party, no lavish gifts, just a simple congratulations.

I was struck by Senator Obama’s refreshing candor. He shared this frank assessment at a gathering of educators. He spoke the truth, as he understood it, not to be mean or petty, but because he wanted much more for our children. That is not to say we shouldn’t celebrate their achievements, but too much of a good thing makes everything seem ordinary after a while. If everything is worthy of a lavish celebration, then what becomes of the true milestones in our lives?

Senator Borak Obama is what I would consider a faithful politician. He does precisely what Paul instructs all Christ’s followers to do, speak the truth in love. What I heard that Saturday morning impressed me because while he joked about quashing eighth grade graduations, his intent was to build up the esteem and achievements of all young people. His true intent was to remind those children who are the most vulnerable to set lofty goals for themselves and to never sell themselves short. He hoped to reinforce the standards and practices of his own generation that served him well. In our haste to redefine the rules for our children and to make sure they have what we were not able to have, we often lose what has worked well. In fact, struggling to uphold those traditions against a rising tide of change is really the loving and faithful thing to do.

In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, Paul addresses early Christians striving to create loving, life affirming community with each other. They were Gentile Christians. Unlike their brothers and sisters who were converts to Christianity from the Jewish faith, they

possessed no such religious history. Without the benefit of a solid religious foundation, Paul must specifically instruct them how to live, what to do, and what not to do. They were pagan converts learning to be faithful Christians, one stumbling step at a time.

Paul's advice is clear and straightforward, however not at all easy to maintain. We all benefit from the clarity that Paul provides in this passage. We know how difficult it is to speak the truth in love, to acknowledge one's anger but to not allow it to damage our relationships. We know there are times when we are not tender hearted, when we do not speak up when people we love speak harshly about others, or neglect to speak out when others do and say things that do not build up the body of Christ. Paul reminds this church in Ephesus that they no longer live solely for themselves but are now members of each other. Therefore, when they say something that hurts another person, they are in fact hurting themselves. We know what it is like to speak before we consider the affect our words may have on another person. We can so quickly become possessed by the demon of righteous indignation. We want to be right at all cost. We become trapped by the misconception that we own the truth and then become unwilling to hear another person's point of view or simply agree to disagree.

Living love comes at a price, a price some of us are not willing to pay. We run the risk of losing a person's friendship, that someone may not like what we have to say and walk away angry. Paul reminds us that we have no control how others will receive our honesty, but can control how we will respond in turn. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Anger is a natural and acceptable response. However, we must not allow anger to fester and poison our relationships.

Paul is not only concerned with what we say, but also with how we behave as people of faith. Remember the old saying, "it is not always what you say but how you say it." In the same way, Paul instructs the early church that their actions speak louder than words. Even if we think we are right, it is not okay to allow our words to become weapons without regard for how we treat other people. Paul tells us to always act as if someone else were taking notes, behave in ways that leave you with no regrets, or feeling ashamed.

Strange thing is people not only listen to what we say, but also pay attention to how we live. What we do and what we say should all serve to usher in the kindom of God. What we say, how we say it, the words we use, our tone of voice, whether we have the courage to look someone in the eye, whether we are willing to stand toe to toe to speak our truth, all this matters. Beautiful stories alone will not save the world. The world will not be redeemed unless we put those truths into action, when they become enfleshed in our own lives. The world will be redeemed when we have the courage to wrestle with the truth, just as Jacob wrestled with the angel and emerged from the encounter with a blessing.

We live in such dangerous, uncertain times. Images of long lines and barrels full of discarded toiletries reminded us this week how far some people are willing to go to destroy what they think is their enemy. News of rocket attacks and abandoned peace talks remind us of the fragility of peace. Most rational, law abiding, loving people would not even know how to create a liquid bomb, but you can never be too sure or too safe.

Code orange, the world is on heightened alert. Code blue, a beloved one is near death, come quickly, Lord. Code green, our gluttonous appetites threaten to destroy the planet we claim to cherish. Code red, without the love of Christ, without a compassionate spirit, a forgiving and forgiven heart, with out the ability to truly listen, we will have no future to celebrate. We need the Holy Spirit to fill our lives with love and transform our warring, angry spirits into instruments of peace.

The future depends on our ability and willingness to listen to each other. We can not make it if we are not willing to forgive one another, if we let the sun go down on our anger, if we allow it to fester and infect our future. We can not make it if we do not speak out against our warring nature, if we do not denounce violence and discrimination, and seek to eliminate hurtful behavior in our homes, churches, schools, or communities. If we think the resentment we harbor against the woman that cuts us off while talking on her cell phone trying to make a right turn into the church parking lot has no ill effect on our being, we are wrong. When we accept and tolerate simple acts of anger it is not long before we act in more hurtful and damaging ways toward others. We can prevent this from happening by living in love, as Jesus models and teaches us to live.

Nothing we do is trifling or insignificant. That can be a daunting prospect at times. We all falter. We all sin. However, Paul instructs us how to live together in loving community. We are not powerless. As long as we have a voice, we can speak out. As long as we have two arms, we can offer someone who is suffering a compassionate hug. As long as we have the will, we can change the way we respond, directed by the Holy Spirit to do that which builds up the body, not that which tears it apart.

Speaking the truth in love is the cornerstone of Paul's teaching and perhaps the most difficult to do. How might Paul have understood truth? There is a sense of the word *truth* that is used in the Hebrew text that helps me to understand how Paul sees truth. It's the sense of the word *true* when a wife says about her husband, "He's true to me." The word *true* here means faithful or loving. In fact, the Hebrew word for truth, *emet*, is more often translated as "faithfulness" in the Hebrew Text, than as truth. Therefore, when the Bible speaks of God as abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, the word *faithfulness* is the same word that they have for *truth*. Speaking the truth in love means speaking to each other as God speaks to us, with steadfast love and faithfulness. How important it is then, that whenever we speak with each other, we remember to speak as God does, with steadfast love and faithfulness.

Our lesson ends this morning reminding us to "be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Our lives are a response to God's steadfast love and faithfulness, not only in what we say, or how we say it, but in what we do, how we live every day. We are not simply people of the word, but members of the body of Christ, living, breathing, loving, seeking to discern and do God's will in the world. Living love is certainly a beautiful place to begin. May it be so! amen