

“I Like To Be Told”  
Ephesians 4:25-32  
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 11, 2024  
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Scripture      Ephesians 4:25-32 (NRSVUE)

So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Those who steal must give up stealing; rather, let them labor, doing good work with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is good for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

As a child, there was nothing scarier than going to the doctor’s office to get shots. Sometimes I knew that the upcoming doctor’s check-up would include shots, and so I would psyche myself up, imagining what the needle would feel like in my arm, how long it would take to get the shot, how long my arm would hurt afterwards. I was afraid that I would bleed or pass out or, perhaps even more embarrassing, cry. And then sometimes I didn’t know there would be a shot when I went to the doctor, and the doctor would say to my mom or dad, “Oh well since we’re here, why don’t we do this shot, it won’t be that bad...” (!) Those times were even worse than the days (or even weeks) of anticipation in advance of knowing I’d get a shot. Those times when my fear surprised me were awful—because I like to be told what to expect.

Well, when I was a teenager, I started getting allergy shots regularly and eventually my fear subsided. As an adult, getting shots is still not my favorite thing by any means, but I got used to the experience over time and have grown to understand the importance of medical care, including getting shots.

So when I heard Mr. Rogers’ song “I Like to Be Told,” you can see why my childhood fear of shots at the doctor’s office was the first thing I thought of.

“I like to be told  
When you’re going away,  
When you’re going to come back,  
And how long you’ll stay,  
How long you will stay,  
I like to be told.

I like to be told  
If it's going to hurt,  
If it's going to be hard,  
If it's not going to hurt.  
I like to be told.  
I like to be told.

It helps me to get ready for all those things,  
All those things that are new.  
I trust you more and more  
Each time that I'm  
Finding those things to be true.

I like to be told  
'Cause I'm trying to grow,  
'Cause I'm trying to learn  
And I'm trying to know.  
I like to be told.  
I like to be told.”

Mr. Rogers, as usual, tells the simple and profound truth that being honest builds trust, and that sharing honest expectations with children can help them learn and grow. And he reminds us adults to remember that new experiences can be scary and can raise anxiety and fear, and that we need to be trustworthy adults for the children in our lives.

Telling the truth builds trust, even if that truth is that something will hurt or be hard or that someone is going away for a while, or forever. Having someone be honest with us helps us grow and learn—whether we are seven years old or seventy.

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, I woke up to what I expected to be a “normal” at-home-COVID-times Wednesday...except it wasn't normal. My phone was buzzing with notifications because so many friends in the Eastern and Central time zones were texting me and the news notifications were popping up faster than I could click on them as they updated in real time. My friend Sarah said, “You better turn on the TV.” And I had that feeling that I had on 9/11, that feeling that said, “History is happening. The world will be different now.”

And it's true. Something changed that day—in me, maybe in us, in our country—as I watched an angry crowd, some brandishing crosses and this nation's flag in the same hand, push their way into the capitol building. I'll never forget watching my representative, Pramila Jayapal, hunker down in the House gallery as people screamed and smashed glass and broke into the legislative chambers, some calling for the death of politicians. (I was speechless for a part of the day, and then I began to write the Epiphany sermon for that coming Sunday, the gospel of Matthew echoing far beyond the first century Judea.)

And I thought of the children and youth of this church, watching this or hearing about it from grown-ups at their school or in their home. I wondered what they were feeling and thinking and

pondering, if they were confused or scared or sad—or maybe all that and more! So I sent an email to the children, youth and their grown-ups in our church saying I was going to hold space on Zoom if anyone wanted to talk. Mazie Zaugg came on the screen and we had a conversation I will always remember. After talking about what she had heard at school, and what Erik and Laura had talked to her about, Mazie, almost eight years old, said something like: “I thought the president was supposed to be a good example. If he’s a leader, shouldn’t he help people? Why is the president not helping? Why didn’t he tell the crowd to stop?”

Mazie was naming clearly what so many adults were trying to express. And we talked about her questions, about what a good leader should be like, about how we feel when we see someone not living up to our values and expectations, about how violence does not solve problems and what we wish people would do to make peace. That conversation was important to me, and Mazie remembers it too. I’m so grateful that in this church, we can practice telling the hard truth to one another, even with children, so that we can discern how our individual and communal values lead us forward to follow the Way of Jesus’ love and justice together.

Mr. Rogers knew it was important to tell the truth to kids. The night before Robert F. Kennedy’s funeral in 1968, Daniel Stripe-ed Tiger asked Lady Aberlin on Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood: “what does assassination mean?” and Lady Aberlin told Daniel, clearly and simply. And also encouraged Daniel that people deal with grief in many different ways, and we each have to find our own way—so Lady Aberlin went to a picnic to spend time with friends, and Daniel stayed in his treehouse where he felt safe.

Throughout the run of his show (1968-2001), Mr. Rogers talked openly about not only Robert F. Kennedy’s assassination, but the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; the Iran hostage crisis; the 1986 Challenger explosion, as well as more personal challenges like illness, death and divorce. Mr. Rogers did not shy away from talking about the hard things in the world—to children, to parents, to churches, to congress, to anyone! And with children, he knew that developmentally, children needed to be told the truth in an age-appropriate way so that they would have the opportunity to grow and learn, just like the song says.

Right before he sang, Mr. Rogers said, “Mostly, even when it’s hard, people like to be told the truth about things.” Child me knew that instinctively as I anxiously awaited shots, and Mazie knew that as she talked with adults about the insurrection, and Daniel Stripe-ed Tiger knew that when he need to know the meaning of a big word he had heard in the news.

As followers of the Way of Jesus, we are called to be truth-tellers. Jesus told the truth, even when it was hard—even to respected people within his religious tradition, to the people in his hometown who eventually ran him out, and to representatives of the Roman Empire who felt threatened by his solidarity with those living under their oppression. Did Jesus’ followers always understand what he was doing, or why he was doing it? The gospels certainly lead us to believe they did not—but they still followed him, recognizing the world that could be possible by living the values that united them. The letter of James tells us to speak with integrity, to “let our yes be yes and our no be no.” And Paul’s letter to the Ephesians says, “So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another...Let no

evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is good for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” Honesty is important within a community--and also for building up community!

And so we are called to tell the truth. To tell truth to power. To tell the truth to each other. To tell the truth to ourselves.

Because we like to be told when it's going to hurt, when it's going to be hard, when someone is going away, how long someone will stay...it will help us grow and learn, and we never grow out of needing to grow and learn.

It probably goes without saying that we all know truth is having a rough time of it out there. Truth is hard to come by these days, sometimes because we don't know what is true and sometimes because it is just more pleasant and comfortable to not face the truth. And sometimes because discerning the truth means picking carefully through awful lies and stories that have been twisted...and it is hard. Author Flannery O'Connor wrote, “The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally.”

Boy, don't we know it.

But the truth is worth it, and our world, our country, our community depends on it. Actually, people's *lives* depend on telling the truth.

So whether we find ourselves having to tell the truth about mental health, about transphobia towards Olympic athletes, fact-checking political claims, numbers of dead in military operations, and more—the truth is worth it. Honesty is a sign of integrity, honesty builds community, and we depend on truth-telling so that we can see and speak and move around in the world being clear and just. Equipping ourselves and our loved ones with the truth about our lives and about our world empowers us to live with mercy, compassion and peace, particularly in places where those things are sorely lacking.

That's why we have to practice truth-telling close to home. To ourselves, first and foremost. So that we can follow the Way of Jesus, the Way that breaks down barriers and turns society upside down and folds relationships inside out—the Way that declares the first shall be last and the last shall be first, the Way that declares peacemakers children of God.

Prophetic thinker and writer James Baldwin famously said, “If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see.” This kind of truth-telling, too, builds trust. Honesty shared, even when it is hard. Truth pursued, even when it is unpopular or unpleasant. When carried through with love and compassion, honesty and truth-telling can build a compassionate community with space to be messy, beautiful, real humans.

And we need that space. Perfectionism runs rampant in this USAmerican culture, and so often we can be afraid of being messy. We can be afraid of not knowing what to say or do, of asking questions, of not being an expert, of being wrong. We can be afraid of choosing sides, afraid of how people around us will look at us, afraid of disagreement, afraid of conflict...all of this is so very very messy. But compassion, literally the suffering-with-one-another, transforms truth-

telling so that it can be done with an understanding of fallible humanity, and an understanding that we can only do our best each day, and commit to learning and growing as we go.

So when we tell the hard truths, let us not do it to feel superiority over one another or to put another's personhood down. Let us do it because we care so deeply about each other that we must tell the truth. Because we want each other to learn and grow into the best "me" and "you" and "us" we can be. And we know that this process of messy becoming is not one embarked upon alone...we can, we must, commit to being alongside each other on this journey.

I like to be told...

When it's going to hurt,

When it's going to be hard,

When you're going away,

When you'll be back,

When we can talk,

When I can have time and space to process,

When I'll feel better.

I like to be told

That you are with me,

That we can disagree and still be in relationship,

That you care for me, and I for you, that we can work through what separates us,

That war and violence will end...and that there are ways to make it so,

That hurt doesn't last forever,

That justice will be done,

That peace is possible,

That the first will be last and the last will be first,

That there is something we can do to affect positive change in the world,

That together we are always better.

Because we are trying to learn,

And trying to grow,

And trying to know.

And we can learn and grow and know...together, as we follow the Way of Jesus each day.

May it be so.

Amen.