

TENDER INTEGRITY

EPHIPHANY 4 JANUARY 31, 2010 JEREMIAH 1:4-10 PSALM 71:1-6
1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13 LUKE 4:21-30

LET US PRAY: LORD, MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATION OF OUR HEARTS BE ACCEPTABLE IN YOUR SIGHT. AMEN.

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST, GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND OUR LORD AND SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST. AMEN.

WE HEAR IT MOST OFTEN DURING WEDDINGS, BUT IT WAS NEVER MEANT FOR WEDDINGS. IT WAS MEANT FOR A CHURCH IN CONFLICT. **“LOVE DOES NOT INSIST ON ITS OWN WAY.”** PROBABLY MEANT FOR US TOO HUH? FOR US WITH FAMILY IN OUR HOMES - ALTHOUGH PAUL WASN'T MARRIED SO HE DOESN'T KNOW HOW TOUGH THAT IS IN THE HOME - TO NOT INSIST ON ONE'S OWN WAY; ALL THE WAY TO BEING MEANT FOR US IN OUR CHURCH FAMILY, BUT THEN AGAIN, PAUL WAS ON THE ROAD A LOT AND WASN'T LIVING IN ONE CHURCH FAMILY FOR ANY LENGTH OF TIME, THOUGH HE MAYBE KNEW THE DIFFICULTY OF PUTTING THOSE WORDS IN PRACTICE, JUST THE SAME.

LOVE DOES NOT INSIST ON ITS OWN WAY. ITS NO WONDER PAUL GOT BEAT UP A LOT ON HIS MISSIONARY JOURNEYS. **LOVE DOES NOT INSIST ON ITS OWN WAY.** HOW IS THAT STRIKING YOU THIS MORNING? MANY IF NOT ALL OF YOU KNOW THAT OVER MOST OF THIS LAST YEAR I HAVE BEEN STRUGGLING WITH THE NATIONAL PLANNING AND DECISIONS OF OUR CHURCH IN REGARDS TO OUR SEXUALITY SOCIAL STATEMENT THAT IS SOON TO BE IMPLEMENTED. I FIND MYSELF NOW IN OPPOSITION TO MY CHURCH. YOU SHOULD KNOW IT ISN'T THE FIRST TIME. 21 YEARS OF MY 31 YEARS AS A PASTOR HAVE BEEN IN THE ELCA, AND FOR ME FROM THE BEGINNING IT HAS BEEN **“LOVE DOES NOT INSIST ON IT'S OWN WAY.”** SO I HAVE BEEN TAKING MY “GO ALONG TO GET ALONG” PILL FOR YEARS NOW. I HAVE GIVEN IN OVER AND OVER AGAIN FOR THE SAKE OF PEACE AND UNITY. IT STARTED IN 1987-1988, WHEN I WAS FIGHTING FOR YOUR REPRESENTATION AT

SYNODICAL AND NATIONAL GATHERINGS. I ENDED UP TAKING MY GO ALONG TO GET ALONG PILL FOR THE SAKE OF PEACE AND UNITY. EVEN 10 YEARS AGO WHEN WE WERE SEEKING SOME AGREEMENTS WITH THE EPISCOPALIAN CHURCH, WE LUTHERANS COMPROMISED OUR DOCTRINE OF MINISTRY WHICH TOOK ME FROM BEING A PASTOR MORE ALONGSIDE OF YOU TO BEING A PASTOR ABOVE YOU. THE EPISCOPALIANS REQUIRED IT. WE WERE EVEN TOLD BY ONE OF OUR HISTORIANS IN THE ELCA THAT YOU DON'T HAVE TO BELIEVE SOMETHING TO GO ALONG WITH IT. IT DIDN'T SOUND RIGHT – BUT FOR THE SAKE OF PEACE AND UNITY, I TOOK MY “GO ALONG TO GET ALONG PILL” I DIDN'T INSIST ON MY OWN WAY. I GAVE IN –AND SO HERE I AM AGAIN TODAY.

WONDERING? STRUGGLING! PRAYING? AND THESE WORDS TODAY AREN'T JUST FOR ME, BUT THEY ARE FOR YOU AS WELL. **“LOVE DOESN'T INSIST ON ITS OWN WAY.”** WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WITH THAT? IT'S NO WONDER PAUL GOT BEAT UP SEVERAL TIMES AND THE PEOPLE OF JESUS HOME TOWN WANTED TO THROW HIM OVER A CLIFF. THIS MIGHT EVEN CAUSE YOU TO STOP READING YOUR BIBLE. IN MY OWN WRESTLING WITH IT THIS WEEK, I RANDOMLY PICKED UP A BOOK TO SETTLE MY MIND BEFORE GOING TO BED THIS ONE NIGHT AND I READ A STORY ABOUT A CONVERSATION BETWEEN TWO PASTORS: IT WENT KIND OF LIKE THIS:

TENDER INTEGRITY **By Philip Gulley**

I have a **friend named Tom** who pastors a church over in Ohio. We used to pastor in the same town, but that was three churches ago for Tom. Every so often we **visit on the phone**. **He tells me his latest thoughts** on church growth. Tom has a lot of ideas concerning church growth, none of which seem to take hold. This past year, he was betting on mimes to pack in the crowds.

The idea came to him during worship. **“If you have mimes, they will come!”** a voice whispered. So at the next meeting of elders, he talked about bringing gospel truth and revival through the ministry of miming. **These elders are nice people, which is how they got to be elders. They believe in niceness, even at the expense of truth.**

“Now there's a good idea, Pastor,” they told him. “Why don't you organize a special Sunday evening service with mimes? That's a fine idea. We'll look forward to that. Mimes—why didn't we think of that?”

Tom found two mimes, set up the worship service, ran ads in the paper, brought in extra chairs, showed up early to unlock the doors, and waited for the crowds. But no one came except the mimes and Bill, the janitor. **Everyone else stayed home and watched 60 Minutes. They were just being nice and didn't have the courage to tell him the truth—that a worship service with mimes was the dumbest idea they'd ever heard and they wouldn't attend if their lives depended on it.**

Tom was furious. He called me on the phone. **“I am so tired of nice people who lie to keep from hurting my feelings,” he said.**

As a result, Tom has committed himself to telling the truth. He tells people what he thinks, whether they want to know or not. Like the lady who’s done his church’s newsletter for the past twenty years, the worst newsletter in the kingdom of God. Tom told her he thought the newsletter needed freshening up and that **she should take out the column that lists all the people who missed a Sunday.** So she took it out, and now she’s writing a column rating his sermons. **One Bible means the sermon was bad; four Bibles means the sermon was good. According to her, Tom’s been giving a lot of one Bible sermons lately.**

But he is happier than I’ve ever seen him. **“For the very first time, I can look that woman in the eye, and she can look me right back. No more hiding behind polite little lies. I think we might even end up loving each other,” he told me.**

THE STORY ENDED WITH THIS CONCLUSION: I’ve been thinking on this—how when truth is lacking, love cannot be found. But when folks value truth over niceness, love has a chance to take root. John Woolman was an honest Quaker from way back. He got away with it because he combined truth-telling with tenderness, something I often forget to do. **Tender integrity.** He once wrote, “To see the failings of our friends and think hard of them, without opening that which we ought to open, and still carry a face of friendship—this tends to undermine the foundation of true unity.”

Truth is the highest expression of love. A lot of times I won’t say something to folks because I don’t want to hurt them and I want to be liked. Whenever I do that, I try to convince myself that I’m practicing love. But I delude myself. **Love looks you straight in the eye and speaks truth.** When we fail to do that, it’s generally because we value personal comfort more than another’s growth. Love takes a person by the hand and speaks truth and leaves that person better. **Tender integrity.**

Here’s a good test to know whether or not truth-telling springs from love. Truth will not only pain those who hear it; it will pain those who speak it. If we don’t love someone, it won’t hurt at all to speak truth. We’ll tell them what we think with no regard for their feelings. If telling the truth is fun, it probably doesn’t come from love. Jeremiah told the truth and was called the “weeping prophet.”

Sometimes truth brings tears. This is why some folks, despite being good people, will settle for niceness over truth. A poor trade. I think of love and truth as twins forever joined. When one goes a certain way, the other is bound to follow. PHILIP GULLEY

IT CERTAINLY GOT ME TO THINKING ABOUT THIS **“LOVE DOES NOT INSIST ON IT’S OWN WAY BUSINESS.”** NOW I REALLY COULDN’T GET TO SLEEP THAT NIGHT. I DECIDED LAST SPRING TO STOP TAKING THE **“GO ALONG TO GET ALONG PILL”.** AND I HAVE HAD THIS ACHE IN MY HEART EVER SINCE.

SOMETIMES WHEN WE TELL THE TRUTH EVEN WITH TENDER INTEGRITY WE GET ACCUSED OF BEING JUDGMENTAL, DON’T WE? YOU SHOULDN’T JUDGE WE ARE TOLD. BUT WHO OF YOU DOESN’T JUDGE. YOU ALL DO IT ALL THE TIME. THINK ABOUT YOUR DAY. THINK ABOUT **PEOPLE YOU COME ACROSS EVERYDAY** – DO YOU COME TO JUDGMENTS ABOUT THEM? YOU SURE DO. DO YOU **TEACHERS** EVER MAKE JUDGMENTS ABOUT YOUR STUDENTS OR THEIR PARENTS? DO YOU **EMPLOYERS OR MANAGERS** EVER MAKE JUDGMENTS ABOUT THE PEOPLE WHO WORK FOR YOU OR ALONG SIDE YOU? DO YOU **EMPLOYEES** EVER MAKE JUDGMENTS ABOUT YOUR BOSSES? I KNOW NONE OF YOU EVER

MAKE JUDGMENTS ABOUT **POLITICIANS**. THINK ABOUT THE JUDGMENTS YOU MAKE ABOUT OTHERS WHEN IT COMES TO THE WELFARE OF YOUR CHILDREN. I THINK IT IS TIME TO QUIT HIDING BEHIND THAT ACCUSATION TO MAKE OTHER PEOPLE FEEL GUILTY OR TO BE INDIFFERENT YOURSELF OR UNCOMMITTED TO A PARTICULAR SITUATION. WHEN JESUS WAS TALKING ABOUT NOT JUDGING, HE WAS TRYING TO GET EACH OF US TO LOOK AT OURSELVES FIRST RATHER THAN SKIPPING RIGHT TO THE OTHER PERSON TO MAKE OURSELVES FEEL BETTER ABOUT OURSELVES BY PUTTING OTHERS DOWN.

I WOULD SUGGEST TO YOU THAT BEING LOVING REQUIRES YOU TO MAKE JUDGMENTS, TO BE JUDGING. BECAUSE WE SO OFTEN WILL DEFINE WHAT LOVE MEANS AND GET IT WRONG. IF YOU ARE GOING TO BE LOVING TO ME, THIS IS WHAT THAT WILL REQUIRE. SINCE WHEN DO I OR YOU GET TO MAKE THE RULES ABOUT WHAT IS LOVING OR NOT? A YOUNG MAN SAYS TO HIS GIRL FRIEND, IF YOU REALLY LOVE ME, THEN YOU NEED TO GIVE ME WHATEVER I WANT. THE GIRL GIVES IN SO SHE DOESN'T GET DUMPED. WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THAT YOUNG MAN? **YOU HAVE JUST JUDGED HIM YOU SEE**. WHEN I WAS IN FIFTH GRADE, IT WAS THE YEAR WE ALL GOT A CHANCE TO START PLAYING IN THE BAND. I TRIED OUT THIS BRAND NEW SHINY TRUMPET AND WANTED IT MORE THAN ANYTHING AT THE TIME. **MY FOLKS SAID NO**. WAS IT LACK OF MONEY? I DON'T KNOW. BUT I WENT STAMPING HALFWAY UP THE STAIRS OF THAT OLD HOUSE, STAMPING MY FEET AS HARD AS I COULD ON THOSE OLD CREAKY STEPS, SHOUTING, CRYING, YOU DON'T LOVE ME. WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT ME DOING THAT? **OH, OH, YOU JUST JUDGED ME**.

DEAR FRIENDS, THINK ABOUT THIS. NONE OF THIS IS ABOUT INSISTING ON MY WAY. OR YOU INSISTING ON YOUR WAY. OR INSISTING ON THE REPUBLICAN'S WAY. OR INSISTING ON THE DEMOCRAT'S WAY. IT IS NOT EVEN ABOUT INSISTING ON THE AMERICAN WAY. NOW YOU ARE REALLY JUDGING ME. I WOULD COMMEND TO YOU THAT **IT IS ALL ABOUT INSISTING ON THE JESUS WAY**. JESUS SAID, "I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE." IF

YOU FOLLOW HIM AND HIS WAY, YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH, AND THE TRUTH WILL LEAD YOU TO LIFE.” JESUS SAID, **“I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE.”**

AND ANYTIME YOU PICK UP YOUR BIBLE TO READ OR TO STUDY, IT IS TO DISCOVER THE JESUS WAY. ANYTIME YOU HEAR THE SCRIPTURE READ, IT IS TO GUIDE YOU IN THE JESUS WAY.

WE HAVE THIS CATCH PHRASE IN THE CHURCH NOW THAT WE NEED TO BE A WELCOMING AND AFFIRMING COMMUNITY. I WANT TO ASK YOU TO THINK ABOUT THAT FOR A MOMENT. I WOULD TELL YOU THAT IT SOUNDS NICE, INVITING AND AFFIRMING. **BUT IS IT THE JESUS WAY?** DOES IT GO FAR ENOUGH? THE ONLY PEOPLE IN THE SCRIPTURES THAT I SAW JESUS WELCOMING AND AFFIRMING WERE THE CHILDREN. EVEN HIS JOB DESCRIPTION THAT WE HEARD IN THE GOSPEL LAST WEEK WAS MORE THAN AFFIRMING: IT WAS WELCOMING AND TRANSFORMING. WELCOMING AND REFORMING. I SEE VERY LITTLE EVIDENCE IN THE SCRIPTURES WHERE JESUS DIDN'T WELCOME TO CHANGE, AND NOT WELCOME TO LEAVE SOMEONE AS HE FOUND THEM. THAT'S WHY HIS OWN RELATIVES AND FRIENDS FROM CHILDHOOD, AND PEOPLE OF HIS TOWN WANTED TO THROW HIM OVER THE CLIFF AND BE DONE WITH HIM. BECAUSE HE DIDN'T COME TO AFFIRM THEM BUT TO TRANSFORM THEM. TO SAVE THEM FROM THE CONSEQUENCES OF INSISTING ON THEIR OWN WAY. READ FOR YOURSELF AND FIND WHO IS CHALLENGED TO TRANSFORMATION, REFORMING AND RENEWAL WHEN THEY ARE IN JESUS' PRESENCE. A WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY IS TOLD, YES YOU ARE FORGIVEN, BUT GO AND SIN NO MORE. A YOUNG MAN WANTS TO KNOW HOW TO BE SAVED, JESUS KNOWS HE'S RICH AND SO MONEY IS HIS GOD AND HE TELLS HIM TO GO AND SELL ALL HE HAS AND GIVE IT TO THE POOR. THE CHURCH IS CORRUPT AND JESUS DOESN'T AFFIRM IT, BUT CALLS IT TO COME CLEAN. OVER AND OVER AGAIN YOU SEE IT.

EVEN PAUL WHO PENS THESE WORDS TODAY, WRITES THIS TO HIS CHURCH IN GALATIA, AND YOU WONDER WHERE IS THE AFFIRMATION AND THE LOVE: “I AM

ASTONISHED THAT YOU ARE SO QUICKLY DESERTING THE ONE WHO CALLED YOU IN THE GRACE OF CHRIST AND TURNING TO A DIFFERENT GOSPEL – NOT THAT THERE IS ANOTHER GOSPEL, BUT THERE ARE SOME WHO ARE CONFUSING YOU AND WANT TO PERVERT THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST. BUT EVEN IF WE OR AN ANGEL FROM HEAVEN SHOULD PROCLAIM TO YOU A GOSPEL CONTRARY TO WHAT WE PROCLAIMED TO YOU, LET THAT ONE BE ACCURSED. ... AM I NOW SEEKING HUMAN APPROVAL, OR GOD’S APPROVAL? OR AM I TRYING TO PLEASE PEOPLE? IF I WERE STILL PLEASING PEOPLE, I WOULD NOT BE A SERVANT OF CHRIST.....YOU FOOLISH GALATIANS! WHO HAS BEWITCHED YOU?” DOESN’T SOUND VERY AFFIRMING OR LOVING BY SOME OF OUR DEFINITIONS DOES IT?

TO ME AFFIRMATION BY ITSELF SOUNDS OKAY. BUT JESUS WOULD ASK YOU FROM HIS CROSS TODAY, IF I’M OKAY AND YOU ARE OKAY, THEN WHAT IN THE WORLD AM I DOING UP HERE? WE NEED MUCH MORE THAN WELCOME AND AFFIRMATION OF WHO WE ARE MY FRIENDS. WE NEED WELCOME AND SALVATION FROM OURSELVES AND FOR OTHERS.

YOU COME TO THIS TABLE AGAIN – WELCOMED – INVITED – NO ONE IS EXCLUDED – TELL ALL YOUR FRIENDS THEY ARE WELCOME. COME AS YOU ARE. COME IN YOUR **WEAKNESS** AND RECEIVE THIS JESUS WHO LONGS TO NOT LEAVE YOU AS YOU COME BUT TO TRANSFORM YOUR WEAKNESS WITH HIS STRENGTH. COME WITH YOUR **FAILINGS** AND JESUS WILL, DO MORE THAN AFFIRM YOU WITH A PAT ON THE BACK, BUT WILL WELCOME YOU TO RECEIVE HIS FORGIVENESS AND RIGHTEOUSNESS IN EXCHANGE FOR THOSE FAILINGS. COME WITH YOUR **DOUBTS**, WONDERING IF HE REALLY WANTS ANYTHING TO DO WITH YOU, AND HAVE YOUR FAITH MADE MORE CONFIDENT BY THIS JESUS WHO SAYS “I AM FOR YOU.” YOU ARE WELCOME TO COME WITH THE HEAVINESS OF YOUR **GRIEF** OVER ANY LOSS IN YOUR LIFE AND EXCHANGE IT HERE WITH YOUR LORD AND SAVIOR WHO IN THE EXCHANGE OF YOUR GRIEF WILL RENEW YOUR LIFE WITH HOPE BEYOND YOUR WILDEST EXPECTATIONS.

DON'T INSIST ON YOUR OWN WAY DEAR FRIENDS. IT'S JUST NOT THE LOVING THING TO DO. INSIST ON THE JESUS WAY – WITH TENDER INTEGRITY – THIS JESUS WHO COMES TO FORM HIMSELF IN YOU, TO TRANSFORM YOUR MIND TO HIS WAY OF THINKING, TO LOVE IN A WAY THAT TELLS THE TRUTH RATHER THAN SACRIFICING THE TRUTH JUST TO BE NICE. HE IS THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE AND WE ARE INVITED, CALLED, ... TO FOLLOW HIM FOR OUR OWN SAKE AND ALSO THE SAKE OF THE WORLD.

AMEN.