

Faith Mennonite Church
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Living into Community
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Truth that frees, truth that binds

Isaiah 59: 1-4, 8, 14-16, 20; Luke 12:1a-3; Ephesians 4:1-3, 14-16

As the fall election campaigns heat up, candidates and political groups tend to get fairly reckless with the truth. Sometimes inaccurate statements are unplanned, off-the-cuff mistakes that any of us can make when we remember a generality but not the specifics. Most of us have the good judgment to admit that we can't remember enough to state a strong claim. But the fervor of a campaign seems to remove that judgement from some candidates. And for times when they get a bit too emphatic about questionable facts, a whole new profession has developed: fact-checkers.

More insidious, however, are the deliberate efforts to distort the truth. This comes most often in the form of replaying the direct words of a candidate, but pulling them from their context so they appear to say something other than, perhaps even the opposite of, what the originator actually meant and said.

I had an experience of this sort when my boys were younger, although there was no ill intent involved. Our oldest son brought home a good report card or won some type of academic honor—I don't remember the details. While I was happy and proud, as any parent would be, I wanted to communicate that my love for him didn't rest on such achievement; I loved him for who he was; not for how he performed. However, the way I said this could be interpreted in two different ways. I said, "I don't love you any *more* because of this honor." He heard, "I don't love you *anymore*." Fortunately, we had a trusting relationship that helped us sort out the misspeak and today this is a favorite family joke. We often say (with affection) to each other, "I don't love you anymore..."

But in the current social and political climate in our country, this trust is sadly absent. The emotional spectrum for persons who hold different opinions has narrowed to simple disdain. Rather than seeking to clarify, political opponents and their supporters make excuses, and they further blame each other for playing dirty with the facts. The ancient words of the prophet Isaiah sound so contemporary, as if he were surveying our current cultural landscape:

they rely on empty pleas,
they speak lies,
conceiving mischief and begetting iniquity...
their roads they have made crooked;
no one who walks in them knows peace...
justice is turned back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
truth stumbles in the public square...
truth is lacking,
and whoever turns from evil is despoiled. (59:4, 8, 14, 15)

Isaiah's oracle goes on to say that God is so displeased with this situation, so appalled that no one intervenes, that God's very self enters the fray, wielding the armor of justice and salvation, clearing out the debris of dishonesty, and coming to reside among God's people to reestablish the former covenant: "my spirit is upon you, my words that I put in your mouth, will

not depart from you, your children, and your grandchildren, from now on and forever” (59:21). God’s love of truth and of justice is never-ending; it is the very nature of God. As children of God, we are called to share in this love of truth, a truth that will set us free.

But free for what? What kind of freedom? In the upside-down nature of God's kingdom, we're free to be bound. Bound together into a body that embraces difference, even conflict, because the truth isn't always immediately evident. In God's rich diversity, glimpses of truth come in many ways, even ways that may seem oppositional for a time. A friend recently shared a quote from author Rosemary Haughton:

Although truth itself, the eternal wisdom, is unchanging, the discovery of truth and wisdom by human beings is a long, strange, and unpredictable voyage of exploration, in which new kingdoms are discovered in every era. Old insights are added to new ones, modifying both and enriching the Christian heritage of each generation with new treasure. Yet the search is never over, the full wisdom is always beyond the reach of human language, however inspired.¹

Truth binds us together in a body that cares for one another, cares for the common good. Truth binds us together in a community where what we say and how we say it affects the quality of our life together. What we say is so important, said Jesus, that the secrets we tell must come to light; the words we whisper behind closed doors will be revealed. A community—be it the church or an entire country—cannot sustain itself if we cover the truth or if truth is divorced from love and mercy.

The writer of Ephesians eloquently describes this intimate link between truth and love. At the beginning of chapter 4 the writer describes himself as a prisoner of the Lord. This letter was likely written from prison, yet whether this is Paul, or someone writing in his name, there is a greater sense that in or out of prison bars, he is fully bound, fully committed to his relationship with Christ. And as a Christian community, the writer envisions that we are fully bound to one another. Mennonite theologian Tom Yoder Neufeld translates the end of verse 3: “the bond of peace” as the “chains of peace.”

Neufeld, in a recent presentation that he gave to a Mennonite World Conference leadership gathering,² addressed this linking of love and truth in a discussion of *koinonia*—of sharing and partnership. Neufeld was addressing the global reality of Mennonites being a body despite great diversity of belief and practice. How can we be true to one another? True to the gospel? Some voices within MWC have called for autonomy, but Neufeld isn't satisfied with the language of “autonomy, independence, and self-determination.” He asks us to consider “granting each other the space to be as diversely and distinctly and uniquely faithful as possible. This,” he writes, “is a koinonia-space where the walls are thin, the window and doors are open, the conversations are overheard, maybe even interrupted, where we grant each other profound respect without distancing ourselves beyond the reach of counsel and exhortation.”

Neufeld's words can encourage us as we enter a season of conversation and listening in our regional, Central Plains, conference. He reminds us that in Paul's letter to the Romans, the apostle addressed “a vexing set of issues” around ethical practices of eating meat and observing special days that “were at least as troubling to early believers as any doctrinal or ethical issues we face” today. Rather than offering a definitive answer—a single truth—“Paul recognizes that these issues are a test of the koinonia of believers with God and each other. He insists that

¹ Rosemary Haughton, “Theology of Marriage,” in *Male and Female: Christian Approaches to Sexuality* (1976) 213.

² Mennonite World Conference, *Courier* 2012 / 2 & 3.

Roman believers not violate each other's efforts at faithfulness. They must find a way, precisely as those whom God has welcomed, who together share one Lord (14:1-6; 15:7)—to grant each other such space and freedom.

Neufeld continues:

Such mutual respect and freedom shows the strength of *koinonia*. Those granting each other such space remain firmly tethered to each other in the "chains of peace" (Eph 4:3), not because of their resolve, but because of God's. We might think that true *koinonia* might lessen differences that can bring conflict. Instead, it opens even more space for difference. Indeed, it is driven by a "desire for difference" as a gift from God to the community of faith.

Since the *koinonia* of the gospel invites and embraces strangers (Romans 12:13) and enemies (Matthew 5:43), this space must be expected to be the noisy and often conflictual place of new creation. New challenges to unity will arise; new strains will be put on the chains of peace precisely *because* the Spirit will sometimes disturb "fellowship." ...

Such an understanding informs our relations to the global [and regional] body of Christ, where we are coming to value the differences that our histories and our diverse experiences of faithfulness and unfaithfulness have brought us. This appreciation recognizes that we belong to each other by an act of God, and that *koinonia* is a mix of listening, appreciating, exhorting, critiquing, dialoguing—all in the interests of growing closer to each other within the *koinonia* of God.

This linking of truth and love, of being most free when we are bound to one another in and through Christ, creates new spaces, new possibilities for our life in the broader political culture and in our intimate community of faith. Let us hold tightly to truth, but speak truth in love, and chain ourselves to a community ethic that embraces even those with whom we most deeply disagree. This is the way we grow into Christ; this is the way we build a body of love.