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Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

“Grow Up”

How many times in your life have you had to tell someone to grow up? We've all probably experienced those moments. Even the most seasoned among us, those that reached adulthood a long time ago, sometimes have a way of reverting back to childish behavior.

When someone whines incessantly or pouts when they don't get their way, saying those two words can feel so satisfying. In fact, I know we don't normally do this, but if you have someone next to you, I invite you turn to someone, right now, and say, “It's time to grow up!”

That appears to be what the author of Ephesians was saying to the church in Ephesus. Notice the repeated references in today's reading. He names the gifts that each member of the community was given in order to build up the body of Christ until such time as all of them came to maturity, “to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”

The author goes on to say, “We must no longer be children tossed to and fro.” Finally, he writes, “We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” The author anticipates the community coming into maturity. They must no longer be children. They must grow up in every way. It's time to grow up!

But what's the urgency? What's at stake here? I think it's this. Something amazing was happening in the world. Both Jewish people and Gentile people were drawn to follow Jesus. Jews and Gentiles were uniting and forming churches together. It appeared as though the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, sent Jesus, not just to be the Jewish Messiah, not just to a particular sect within Judaism, but to Gentiles as well. It began to be clear that Jesus was the savior of the whole world.

It would be hard to overstate the significance of these two groups uniting in one body. There was a generations-long animosity between them. It was embedded in the Mediterranean world. It was systemic. I think it's safe to say, very few people would have thought it possible for these two groups to coexist in a meaningful way.

However, it became apparent that the hostility between them was not God's desire for the world. Uniting them showed that the power of Christ can accomplish the seemingly impossible. It showed that the love of God can break down dividing walls between people. I imagine God taking delight in all of this like a parent might delight in two feuding children being reconciled to one another.

When you read the book of Acts and other parts of the New Testament, you can sense the excitement among the disciples that God poured out the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles too. It was so astounding and radical the Apostle Paul went as far as to write, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Having said that, it seems the author of Ephesians believed it was possible to fail in this experiment. It seemed there was one thing that could undermine the new thing God was doing: childish behavior. It would take spiritual maturity to make this work.

Think about it. We all know that when different cultures occupy the same space, misunderstandings and harmful things can happen. One can dominate the other. When you've been conditioned your whole life to believe another group of people is strange or inferior or a threat, it's hard to overcome it.

I believe that was why the author of Ephesians called for spiritual maturity. If they were going to act childishly, the project was doomed to failure. Therefore, it was time to grow up. It was time for spiritual maturity. They needed to grow up, as the author said, "in every way."

In our reading today, the author of Ephesians names some elements of spiritual maturity: humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love. But I want to focus on just a fragment of one sentence. He writes, "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ..."

I would suggest that "speaking the truth in love" is not as simple as it sounds. Just speaking can be hard. I recently saw a meme that said, "Some people aren't speaking to you, because they owe you an apology." How many of you have ever received the silent treatment? Someone became upset with you and decided to get revenge by ignoring you. How many are willing to admit you've given someone else the silent treatment?

A gentleman named Kipling Williams has studied the effects of the silent treatment for my than 36 years. In an article in *The Atlantic* magazine, he said, "People use the silent treatment because they can get away with it without looking abusive to others." He says, "and because it's highly effective in making the targeted individual feel bad."

Do you remember the show "Cheers?" There was an episode in which Cliff, the mail carrier, was dating a woman. He wanted to break up with her and, as we all know, breaking up is hard to do. In his struggle, he turned to Sam the bartender. He said, "Sam, you have a lot of experience with this. When you break up with a woman, what do you say?"

Sam said, "I'll call you." Of course, the joke was he won't call. When Sam is faced with an uncomfortable conversation, he avoids it altogether. Today, that kind of thing is called "ghosting." I'll go out on a limb and say that punishing someone by withholding attention is probably not the most grown-up way to deal with conflict.

The author of Ephesians encourages speaking. In fact, what is it we say to young children when they're upset? We say, "Use your words. Speak to me about what's upsetting you." The ability to speak and express feelings is a sign of maturity.

Of course, it's not just any speech the author of Ephesians encourages. The instruction is to speak, but speak the truth. It's often hard to speak the truth, because the truth sometimes hurts. It has been said, "Some things are just better left unsaid. I always recognize those things right after I say them."

Having said that, the truth is vital because you can't fix what you don't acknowledge. Thomas Merton began one of his books writing, "There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality, for life is maintained and nourished in us by our vital relation

with realities outside and above us.” Jesus said, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

Now, I know what you’re thinking. We live in a world where powerful forces obscure the truth for their own benefit. We’re subjected to misinformation and false news. How are we supposed to know who’s right and who’s wrong, when everyone thinks they have the truth?

The author of Ephesians encourages the church to speak the truth, but the sentence continues. Speak the truth...in love. At its heart, I believe that means to speak the truth, but speak it with humility. The spiritually mature person speaks with the intention of building up people not cutting them down. To speak the truth in love is to desire the best for others. It is to recognize there may be truth in what they say as well. The ability to speak one’s mind from a place of love, might be an indication you’re speaking truth. It definitely encourages others to listen.

The Apostle Paul said it this way, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-2).”

I may never get another chance to say this and get away with it, so I’m going to say it now and I say this with love. Grow up everybody! There is nothing that warms the heart of God like human beings relating to each other with maturity and grace and by speaking the truth in love.