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1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

Pentecost 10B

Truth Spoken Here

This morning while I was getting breakfast, I glanced at the label on the package in my hand. There was a lot of information there, telling me how many grams of salt and fat I was about to consume, how many of my minimum daily requirements were being met, and helpfully noting that this product had been made on equipment that had been used to process nuts, just in case I needed to know that. Well-intentioned truth-in-packaging laws have possibly given us more information than we can handle. In England, some packaging even carries information about the carbon footprint of the product, so you have the added benefit of knowing how guilty or virtuous to feel when you eat it. The trouble is, if you actually took the time to read all those labels, a trip to the grocery store could last for days.

Information overload aside, we can probably agree that it's good to know the truth about what we're eating. Jesus made an amazing claim about himself—that he IS the truth, the bread from heaven, real food for our souls. Each Sunday we come to worship in order to feast on that truth and get filled up with joy and hope again. How good that is! But what do we do for the other 167 hours a week? It's tough to walk back out that door in to a world that's governed by principalities and powers, hard just to keep your sanity, let alone being salt and leaven in that world. How do we remember the truth about who we are and what God is doing with us?

A friend I've known since high school was the daughter of the pastor of our church. She was beautiful and talented and never lacked for dates. She remembers that whenever she got ready to go out on a Saturday night, her mother would be standing by the front door and, as she left the house, she would say, "Remember who you are."

Maybe we could all use a pointed reminder like that when we leave the gathered Body and return to our lives out there in the world. The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians reminds us that there's a whole lot more to church membership than just being a name on a mailing list. Don't forget, he says, you signed up for nothing less than a whole new life.

The bottom line is that we are called to be a *community*. In spite of the lies and distorted truths the materialistic world screams at us 24/7, we are not alone out there. We are not freelance agents. No, even as we go about our separate business during the week, we are being knit together into a transformed and transforming body.

This communal body is fueled in two ways. It is fed by what we take in, that True Bread Jesus talks about. The body is nurtured by our worship and prayer life and the positive thoughts we think. But it's also fed in an unexpected way: it's fed by *what comes out of us*, the way a baby is fed by milk from its mother's breast. The words and behavior that issue forth from us can be life-giving, or they can be toxic. The writer gets rather specific about the toxic behaviors we need to eliminate: excessive anger, gossip, negativity, falsehood, thievery, for starters.

If we strive to eliminate the negatives, where does the positive "feeding" come from? Once when Jesus was asked which commandment was the most important, he boiled all 613 Jewish laws down to "love God and love your neighbor." In a similar way, the writer of Ephesians summarizes the mandate of Christian ethics in one phrase: "speaking the truth in love." We nourish the Body of Christ by "speaking the truth in love." Another way to put it is that *we feed each other with truth*.

When Jewish children begin to study the Torah, the rabbi takes the sacred scroll and puts a drop of honey on it for the child to lick off. The message is clear: The word of God is sweet.

But the truth we're supposed to feed each other doesn't always taste so good at first. You don't really want a truthful answer to questions like, "Do these pants make me look fat?" A family story recalls my father as a small boy eating Sunday dinner at his grandparents' table. He heaped his plate with mashed potatoes and gravy and eagerly dived in, then announced, "This gravy tastes nasty!" That one day, his grandmother had forgotten to salt the gravy.

We can think of a lot of reasons for not telling uncomfortable truths. Sometimes it's "nasty" going down. One church's members are really struggling with how to speak the truth in love to a man who is attending there regularly. This man is homeless and he has a great many problems, which the church members are ready to help him with. What they can't deal with is that he has such powerful body odor that they're afraid he will drive away visitors. Yet nobody wants to confront him with that uncomfortable truth. They don't want to "hurt his feelings." It has fallen to the pastor to tell him that he is welcome at worship as long as he has a shower beforehand.

If little every-day truths are awkward to deliver in a spirit of love, how much harder it can be to tackle big truths! Truth-telling can be dangerous. Saying things everybody would rather ignore certainly doesn't help your social life. That kind of thing can get you arrested or even killed. Look at Elijah, on the run for his life because of his truth-telling (which, after all, was his job as a prophet of Yahweh). His showdown with the prophets of Ba'al that resulted in the death of all 450 of them made Jezebel so angry she promised to kill him before the sun went down. So after telling an unwelcome truth, Elijah literally runs for his life.

Truth-telling carries risks. The good news is, it also carries a good deal more. The other night I heard an interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon, the musician, historian of the Civil Rights Movement and founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock. She related how, as a college student in the early 1960's, she reached a point of speaking out against racial segregation. Sometimes uncomfortable truths burst out of us when we just can't keep silent any more. She and other young African American truth-tellers said with their words and actions, "Enough! This is wrong, it is dehumanizing, and we're not going to put up with it any more."

Reagon was arrested, along with other college students, simply for refusing to disperse when they were told to do so. The students spent two weeks in a Georgia jail, and they spent the entire two weeks singing. All that singing left her voice hoarse and exhausted, but soon after her release, she was at a meeting where she was asked to lead the group in singing. She was surprised to find that her voice was fresh and powerful. Soon afterward she dropped out of college to tour the country with the Freedom Singers, eventually joining Dr. Martin Luther King at the rally on the Mall at the climax of the March on Washington in 1963.

Hearing Reagon's story, I was struck by her experience of telling the truth not just with her voice, but with her life. Her story is also a powerful witness to the amazing consequences of truth-telling. Telling the truth got her arrested, but it also released tremendous energy through her music and empowered the entire community in its movement toward freedom. Her experience recalls words from Ephesians (from Peterson's version, *The Message*): "Oh, the utter extravagance of [God's] work in us who trust [God]—endless energy, boundless strength (Eph. 1:19).

"Speaking the truth in love" often means having the courage to say things somebody else isn't going to welcome. It did not come as good news to Ahab and Jezebel that Yahweh was displeased with the way things were going in the kingdom of Israel. It did not come as good news to the white American majority fifty years ago that African Americans were angry about being excluded from full participation in our commonwealth. It does not come as good news to any of us living today that we have been using the resources of our planet at a rate that cannot be sustained. But such truths need to be spoken.

It's not hard to blurt out truth if you don't care about the consequences. But to speak the truth in love means that you act in the belief that the long term effect will be to nourish relationships. In the short term, things may get worse before they get better. Feelings may be hurt. People will get mad. Powerful folks may take it out on you. But in the long run, truth nourishes, and relationships are moved toward a larger truth.

Our calling is to speak the truth in love and to do truth in the world. In the United Church of Christ, we say that "God is still speaking." If that is more than a slogan, it must mean that God is still speaking through you and me, through our lives lived faithfully in community, through the truth we speak in love.