

Sunday, June 16, 2002

A Sermon Preached by  
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# How Honest Can We Be and Still Be Friends?

Ephesians 4:1-32 (selected verses)

Precious God, in the quiet of this moment speak to us all a clear word. A word that will meet everyone of us at our point of need. To that end, pour through me the gift of preaching, that these words might not simply be my words or my human opinions, but by a miracle of your grace, they might become your Living Word to us. We know they will O God for we pray with great anticipation in the strong name of Jesus, the risen and the reigning Christ. Amen.

There is a touching story that grows out of the Special Olympics that took place in Seattle, Washington some years ago. Maybe you know that the Special Olympics are Olympic Games designed for individuals, young men and women, who are physically, mentally or emotionally handicapped in some way. It really is a wonderful event. These young adults can participate in competitions specially designed for them, for their families and friends. Reporters cannot stop talking and writing about the Special Olympics of some years ago. Specifically the 100-yard dash event when nine young men and women lined up on the starting line.

As the gun sounded and all nine began the 100-yard dash, one young man fell and scraped his knee so badly that it started to bleed. He winced in pain and began to cry. The most amazing thing happened. The other eight competitors in the race stopped running, turned around, went back and helped him up. They realized he was crying. One young girl who had Down Syndrome got there first. She was very sensitive to his pain and said, "Maybe this will help you feel a little better," as she kissed him on the knee. Then they helped him up to his feet and again the most amazing thing happened. All nine competitors now linked arms with one another and started to jog a little bit and run a little bit toward the finish line. When they got to the finish line, they all crossed at exactly the same time so they all tied. The whole stadium erupted in applause. Why? Because I believe inherent in the fiber of what it means to be a human being, is realizing that winning is not

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what life is all about. Being first is not what life is all about. What life is all about is helping people who fall in the race of life, helping them so that everybody can be a winner.

Is there anybody here who's ever fallen down in the race of life – fallen and skinned your knee physically or figuratively? Anybody here ever been in a transition that isn't easy – leaving one place and going to another place? Anybody here in a difficult time in your job and frankly you're in-between jobs? Anyone here gotten a diagnosis that you didn't want or a loved one got a diagnosis they didn't want? Anybody here battling depression, discouragement, despair, fatigue? Anyone here at the toughest time of your life?

Let me ask you honestly: when we fall down and skin our knees physically or figuratively, who are the people who have stopped and picked us up? Who are the people who, in the future, will turn around, change their direction, stop what they're doing, come back, inconvenience themselves and pick us up? Who are those people?

On Father's Day we need to be honest enough to say that many of us have had fathers who have done that. Fathers who have been present. On a day like today to be honest, I miss my earthly father. My dad was a wonderful person. I wish you could have known him. He died before Suzanne and I came to Fifth Avenue Church. My dad was that kind of father. When I would fall down, skin my knee or make a big mistake my dad was always there to pick me up. I miss my dad. I know some of you miss your fathers too, and I know some of you are with your earthly fathers today.

Can we also be honest enough to say that there are some earthly fathers who frankly never stopped to pick us up – absentee fathers or grandfathers who weren't

there emotionally at a time when you needed them to be? There you were lying face down on the track of life and you would have loved somebody to come by and pick you up, but your father wasn't present for you. This may be a particularly poignant day for you.

And can we be honest enough to say that there are other people who are not called to be fathers and mothers biologically, but are called to be mentors? There are people like teachers and coaches, friends and social workers, neighbors and colleagues who came and picked you up at such a time and did for you what maybe an earthly father should have or maybe would have done if they had been there. Is there someone who picked you up in the race of life? When you fall down and skin your knee who are the people who pick you up and help you along the journey of life?

On Father's Day, can we also honestly say that there are many men in our society, and many women too, who frankly don't have anyone who would stop and pick them up? I've been reading **We the Lonely People** by author Ralph Keyes. In this book, Keyes laments the fact that in our society we've become more private and individualized than we used to be. He laments the fact that, according to his survey of thousands of men, many men do not have one person whom they trust ultimately with the deepest fears, anxieties and worries of their lives. He's also finding that more and more women have fewer and fewer people whom they really trust with the deepest fears and secrets of their lives. He observes that as technology grows, we communicate more and more with one another, but ironically, what we're sharing with one another is more information and less of ourselves.

This was not always so Ralph Keyes says. It used to be that prior to the Renaissance, people didn't even think of themselves as individuals. Their identity came from the corporate entity of which they were a part. Their identity came from their guild, their family, their tribe or their church. They really didn't even think of themselves as individuals. Today, Keyes says, most people don't really think of themselves as part of a community. They think of themselves only as individuals.

One of my most ardent prayers for us at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church of New York would be, in the midst of this busy fast-paced city where people often get beat up by jobs and by one another, that we would be an oasis of love – a place where people would know each other's names and support each other in Christian community. William James said, "The deepest craving in every human being is the craving to be appreciated." Do you feel appreciated? Mother Teresa said, "The worst disease that any human being can ever experience is the disease of being unwanted." Do you feel wanted? My prayer is that we could be an Ephesians 4 kind of church – the kind of church that helps each other grow

up in Christ to become the people we were all meant by God to be. My prayer is that we could speak the truth in love to one another and be there for the long haul with one another – not hit and run drivers – but people who would share the truth in love with one another, people who would pray for each other and support each other in good times and in bad times.

Some years ago Suzanne and I visited our son Ryan, who was living in Boston where he was getting a Masters in electrical engineering after graduating from the Naval Academy. We loved Boston and for many years, we had loved the Cheers television show. We always wanted to go to the Cheers bar so one day we all went to the Cheers bar – of course we had coffee there at the Cheers bar! We had a wonderful time. Do you know why Cheers is famous? It's famous for being the place where everybody knows your name. I'd love Fifth Avenue Church to be a place where every person who comes in these doors, even a visitor, is greeted and welcomed and that our ushers and greeters say their name back to them and then greet them after the worship service. I'd love you to greet each other after the worship service today and make sure you know someone's name you didn't know when you came in the door.

It's not an easy time to be living in New York City – or anywhere in this world. We're suspicious of one another and there's divisiveness among groups. People are divided from one another, but what Ephesians 4 is calling us to be is a community where we help each other grow up in love. Now how do we do that?

### Be Honest with Yourself

In Ephesians 4, there are three keys to being the kind of Christian community that would help each other be the very best we can be. The first key is to be honest with yourself. If we have the kind of Christian community that God wants us to have then we must be honest with ourselves. Can we be honest enough to say that sometimes in the church of Jesus Christ people aren't always honest. I don't mean we lie, cheat and steal overtly. I don't mean that. I just mean that sometimes we've got this idea that we can't really be honest with each other about our struggles, about our failures, about our past, about our present.

Somehow we've got this idea that we've all got to be perfect. I love the sign that says Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven. I often see that on bumper stickers. It's particularly interesting to me that I see it on the bumper stickers of cars that are often speeding along the freeway! But it is true that Christians aren't perfect, we're just forgiven. So we can be honest with one another and we can tell each other how we're **really** doing. The people I admire are the people who are honest enough with themselves to say I made a mistake, I

was wrong, I overreacted, or I wish I hadn't done that. That means so much. But honesty with someone else starts with honesty with yourself.

Maybe you've heard me tell the story of Isaac Stern, the famous violinist. Years ago he was playing Mozart's Concerto 3 with the New York Philharmonic. Zuben Meta was conducting and in the middle of the piece Isaac Stern forgot his place. As he was trying to figure it out he suddenly just stopped. He got up from his chair, apologized to Zuben Meta and apologized to the others in the New York Philharmonic. He went to the microphone and said to the audience, "I made a mistake. I lost my place. I had a memory lapse. I owe it to Mozart and the integrity of this piece of music to do it over again. I owe it to Zuben Meta and I owe it to my colleagues in the New York Philharmonic to do it again. Would you give me another chance?" And everyone at Lincoln Center burst into applause. Why did they do that? Because everyone of them, at some time in their life, had made a mistake. Everyone of us has made a mistake too. Are we honest enough with ourselves to say I was wrong, I shouldn't have done that? Honesty with others begins with honesty with ourselves.

I was so pleased recently to get a phone call from a member of our church who said on the day of a committee meeting, "Tom I'm really sorry but I will not be at the meeting tonight." I said, "Well thanks for letting me know." Then the member said, "I want to tell you why. I've been out nine consecutive nights at committee meetings or other events. I haven't gotten home in the last nine nights before 10:30 PM and to be honest with you, I'm just 'over-peopled'. I just have too many people around me and I need a night to be quiet, listen to a little music, take a bath, and have supper. I just need to **veg** out tonight. I could have called you and said I'm ill or I'm not feeling well or I'm running late, I might not be there. But I wanted to be honest enough with you to say I'm over peopled." Isn't that the most wonderful expression? Can we be honest enough with ourselves to just say how we feel and what we need?

### Honesty with Ourselves

Honesty with ourselves leads to the second key and that is honesty with others. You see, when you're honest with yourself, when you admit what's going on within you then you can be honest with other people. But you can't be honest with others until you can first be honest with yourself. Authentic honesty with others is a rare commodity in our world today. As we read Ephesians 4, we find the wonderful phrase "speak the truth in love." When we speak to one another, Paul urges us to speak the truth in love. Don't speak the truth in retaliation or in hostility. Don't speak the truth to "get" somebody. Speak the truth in love. Paul goes on to say that then

we will all grow in maturity into the stature of the fullness of Christ.

In other words, truth is for the health of the body of Christ. It's not to point out someone's flaws or to hurt someone, but to help them and us to become by God's grace all we were meant to be. Do you have people with whom you can be honest? Do you have people with whom you can be angry? Ephesians 4 says, "Be angry but do not sin." Anger isn't the sin. The sin is letting the sun go down on the anger. When you let the sun go down on your anger Paul says, you give the devil an opportunity to work on you. And before you know it, you're resentful and bitter. In C.S. Lewis's **Screwtape Letters**, Uncle Screwtape instructs Wormwood, one of the new recruits to Satan's army, to remember that to do permanent damage to Christians, you must get them off the track. If you want to get them sidelined, get them to quit, get them discouraged, you've got to use wedges. You can't lead him into the big problems of life like suicide, alcoholism, and drug addiction without wedges. And do you know what the wedges are? They are fatigue, discouragement, depression, defeatism, isolation, and loneliness.

The devil has those little wedges. One of those wedges is anger that has been allowed to build up over time. The Greek word for anger when it builds up over time is **thumos** – anger that erupts like a volcano. Paul says keep short accounts. Don't let anger build up over weeks, months, years and then explode. Don't go to bed angry. Speak the truth in love. Joanne did that. Joanne is a chaplain and she serves with me on the Board of Trustees of Princeton Theological Seminary. She's a chaplain in a hospital in New Jersey but she's also in the Reserves in the United States Army. After September 11th Joanne was called up. She spent over 90 days at Ground Zero ministering to the families who had lost loved ones. But she also ministered to the rescue workers and the social workers, the doctors and nurses, the police and the firefighters. When somebody needed to talk, Joanne was one of the people whom they talked to. Talk about dealing with anger and rage, she had to deal with it all. It was interesting that she used this Biblical principle of speaking the truth in love.

I am almost sad to tell you this story. It's the story of Joanne ministering to a family – a mother, a father and two children, the boy was 10, the girl was 8. Last June, the father in the family died of cancer. So here is this young mother, a widow, raising these two children and trying to do the best she can as a single parent. Some of you are single parents – it's not easy. She was an executive for a financial firm and her office was in the World Trade Center Towers. When those towers imploded on September 11th, the son and the daughter said to their grandparents and to family friends, "Is mom alright?"

Where is mom?" Joanne Martindale heard well-meaning friends and family members saying to the children. "Well, we're just sure that your mom is OK. We're just positive your mom is going to come back. She's certainly coming back. It's just a matter of when."

Well Joanne was thinking what if their mother doesn't come back. And what if their mom is not in a hospital or didn't make it. What then? Will the children think they've lied? So Joanne knelt down very close to them and in her pastoral way she said, "I'm hoping and praying every day that your mom is alive, but if tragically she was killed in the World Trade Center I want you children to know that I will make sure that there is a family who will raise you. It will not be the same as your mom and dad, but I want to be honest enough with you to say that this is a possibility and I will give you my word that we will find a family for you. Over the weeks ahead Joanne talked to the family and the grandparents and the mother's best friend. It was a good thing that she was so honest with the children because six weeks later they found DNA of the mother and in fact she had been killed in the World Trade Center. Joanne had been back to the children many times and she'd gotten to know them. She made sure that the mother's best friend spent time with them and that the grandparents had spent time with them. Together they had worked some of this out and when she finally told the children that the mother was killed and in a sense they were orphans, the little girl blurted out as the brother put his arm around her, "Who's going to be our mommy? And she started to cry.

Joanne got down very close to her and said, "I want you children to know that if you'll have her, your mom's best friend is willing to take you in and be your mom." The best friend came over, hugged and held them and the grandparents came down and said, "We're going to be very close by but your mom's best friend is really in a good position to take you in." The mom's best friend said, "My husband and I couldn't have children. We want you to come into our home." If you talk to Joanne Martindale today she'll tell you that family is in the process of adopting those two precious children. Do you know why? Because Joanne spoke the truth in love. She was honest with the children.

Are you being honest with people? Are they being honest with you? Do you have those kinds of relationships? Do you have some trusted friends with whom you could share the deepest hurts of life? When you fall and skin your knee on the roadside of life do you have some people who will pick you up? Let me also ask you, are you a mentor for others? Are there people who God wants you to pick up? Where is God calling you to be a mentor this Father's Day? There are many people who don't have a father. Many who have a biological living

father, but he is not functioning as a father. Some people just need somebody to help them up a little bit and dust them off. Then others will come along and help them on life's way.

## Be Honest with God

If we want to grow up to be a great Christian community, not only do we have to be honest with ourselves and honest with others, but most of all we've got to be honest with God. The Apostle Paul has a great phrase he uses over and over again – in Christ Jesus, in the Lord. He uses it in his writings 132 times. What he means is, we need to be connected to God, really close to God, honest with God. I've talked to so many people who say, if I ever told God what I've done or what I've been doing, God would never forgive me. I've said to them, God already knows what you've been doing. God sees. God is aware. And God has already forgiven you on the cross of Jesus Christ. Just repent and receive the forgiveness. God is more eager to give than you are to receive. You could have a whole new life. It's true. Are you really honest with God? I mean gut-level honest! Though there are human beings with whom we can share intimately, with God we can share the most intimate fears, the deepest thoughts, and the most significant pain.

I just close with a thought that not long ago a man came to me with an issue with which he had been struggling for many years. Five years ago he lost his job. He did not tell his family, his friends or anyone. He lives in New Jersey. He took the train into the city every day for two months because he thought surely he would get another job. He was embarrassed. He didn't want to tell his wife or his family. He didn't tell anyone and he came in for two months! Finally he realized he couldn't keep the charade going so he told his wife that he was in-between jobs. But for the last five years he hadn't really been honest with her. He hadn't really been honest with himself. He hadn't really been honest with anybody. He'd been in and out of work and doing consulting, but he hadn't really faced the fact that he was in such trouble!

And so we prayed together and he said, "Tom I don't know, I just don't know how long I can hold on. I mean, I'm trying to hold on to God. I'm really trying. I'm trying to hold on to hope. I'm trying to hold on to the future. I'm trying to hold on but it isn't easy and I just came to ask you to pray that I can get some strength." And for the first time he was honest. It was like he felt lighter just from talking about some of the things that had been going on during the last five years. And when I prayed from a source outside of myself – it had nothing to do with me. It was the Holy Spirit of God. I heard myself saying to him, "When you can't

hold on to God anymore, when you can't hold on to hope, when you can't hold on to the future, when you can't hold on to anything, God will hold on to you and He will never, ever, ever, let you go." If we want to be a great Christian community, we've got to be honest with ourselves, honest with each other and honest with the only one who will always be there and who will never, ever let us go. The one who doesn't necessarily give us everything we want, but who will always be there. His name is Jesus Christ. Don't miss being honest with Him.