

**PENTECOST XII, 2018**  
**Ephesians 4.25 – 5.2**

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*Therefore, putting away falsehood,  
let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor,  
for we are members one of another.*

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Back during the Soviet era in Russia, people developed a sort of political humor called “anecdotes.” One of them was about the news media. The Communist government controlled the flow of information; there was no such thing as what we call a “free press.” All news came through two state newspapers, *Pravda* and *Isvestia*. “Pravda” is the Russian word for “truth.” “Isvestia” is the Russian word for “news.”

So Russians would describe their situation with this anecdote: “We have two newspapers in our country. One is *The Truth* and the other is *The News*. The problem is, in *The Truth* there is no news, and in *The News* there is no truth.”

I think of that anecdote more and more whenever I watch TV news programs (which is less and less). It’s all the same stuff, rehashed and retold over and over. Everyone puts their own spin on the news, to fit their pre-determined narrative.

What is worse is the outright lying that goes on today in the news media, in our political life, and indeed society in general. People just lie shamelessly. There is no regard for truth. Some observers of our society say we now live in a “post-truth” era. There simply is no regard, no effort, to discern and do what is true. What matters is whether something conforms to the narrative I have chosen to believe in advance, regardless if it is true or not.

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In our reading from the Letter to the Ephesians St. Paul writes: “Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.” It is similar to something Paul wrote a few verses before this: “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...” Our growth into mature faith in Christ and following Him depends on discerning and do-

ing what is true. And in a world of falsehood, St. Paul wants the Church to be a place in which truth dwells, a “zone of truth” in a culture of lies.

Paul’s words remind us, also, of Jesus’ teaching in John’s Gospel: “the truth shall make you free.” That was the motto of my college, Texas Lutheran. Freedom needs a place to stand. It needs to be anchored in the Truth: the truth about God and the truth about what it means to be a human being. Freedom not anchored in truth degrades into moral and social chaos. But the freedom for excellence, for goodness, for things worthy of praise, to be noble creatures God created us to be, must be rooted and nurtured in the Truth about God and the human being. And no community can long survive which consciously fails to discern and do what is true.

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So let us consider: What is speaking the truth?

On one level our speech must be factually true. That is, it must recognize and reflect the facts of a situation. Remember the old TV series, *Dragnet*? The main character was Sergeant Joe Friday. His famous line as he investigated crimes was, “Just the facts, m’am (or sir).”

“Just the facts.” truthful speech begins with getting our facts straight: Checking out what we hear to make sure it is indeed true, instead of simply rumor. How often we hear things and immediately assume they are true, when they are just rumor! So please: take the approach of Sergeant Friday: Just the facts. Check out what you hear. As the saying goes, “God made us with two ears and one mouth. We should use them in that proportion.”

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Second, truthful speech must be accurate speech. That is, something you say may be factually true, but not completely accurate in terms of when it happened, where it happened, how it happened, and so on.

For example, in one parish I served there was a person who in a discussion would often mention something that happened as support for their position or to place blame on someone. The problem was, what they were recalling was something that

happened long in the past and had no real relation to the matter at hand. What they are saying is factually true: the event happened. But it was not accurate, because it was not a current event; it was not relevant. So, it was not truthful speech.

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A third issue in speaking truthfully is knowing when something might be true, but it is not helpful or appropriate to speak about it. This requires some discernment on our part. In the course of events we will hear many things. We may even find out they are true. But, it is not appropriate for us to speak about them.

For example: a few years ago I learned two friends I knew in college were divorcing after almost forty years of marriage. I chose not to tell any of the others in our circle of friends. Sometime later, when the word got out to everyone, someone asked me why I had not said anything. My answer was, “It was not my news to tell.”

Part of speaking truthfully is knowing when something is not your news to tell. Or, even when you have information you know is true, to refrain from talking about it, because what you know could hurt or embarrass others.

This is especially important in our social media/Facebook age, when something we say can be known to the world in minutes. Learn to discern when something you say may be truthful, but not helpful. Think first: is what I am putting on social media helping or hurting my church’s reputation?

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One of my favorite comments on truthful speech is from the *Small Catechism*, where Martin Luther explains the commandment against bearing false witness: “We should so fear and love God that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray or slander our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain his words and actions in the kindest possible way.”

Very simply: How often are we prone to explain another person’s actions in the worst possible way? Speaking the truth in love may mean we try

to put the best construction on a person’s actions, without giving in to falsehood.

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Then there is the all-too-common problem in churches of anonymous comments. Very simply, we need to learn to speak for ourselves, and encourage others to speak for themselves.

What is the problem with making or aiding anonymous comments? Simply this: it does not serve the cause of truth. It does not help a congregation achieve clarity about what is happening or being discussed, because people do not know who the anonymous people are and cannot engage them in conversation. It promotes passive-aggressive behavior and secrecy, and secrecy is the constant factor in every dysfunctional family, church, or other group.

But you may say, “But people are unwilling to speak up publicly.” That is their problem, not yours. In Christian community – in any community, really – people need to be mature. That means taking responsibility for your actions and words.

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Again, in the verses preceding our text, Paul tells us to speak the truth in love. Love for others must be the motive behind our speech. Without genuine love for others, we can hurt others by speaking the truth in an unkind, hurtful way. For a simple example: suppose you are talking to a person who is dying from cancer. Telling them, “Well, it is because you smoked all those cigarettes” may be a true statement. But it is certainly not what they need to hear at that moment. The truth they need to hear is that the Lord is with them, not laying guilt on them for their mistakes in life.

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“Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.” A healthy church is a zone of truth in which the Word of God in Jesus Christ makes and keeps us free. Amen.