

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

May 22, 2016

“Speaking the Truth in Love”

Dear Friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This weekend I had the joy of going to an event with several of our youth and some other members featuring Nadia Bolz-Weber, an ELCA pastor who came to Fargo for our Synod Assembly. Her topic this weekend was “Speaking the Truth in Love” – based on today’s gospel reading. And although I wrote almost all of this sermon before I heard her speak, I need to acknowledge that you may hear traces of her message showing up through my sermon today – and that is okay, because I think it is a message that we all need to hear.

Have you ever had the uncomfortable experience of having to fire an employee? Of having to end a relationship? Of giving news to a patient that they don’t want to hear?

Speaking the truth is not always fun. It’s especially not fun when the news that you share is something that you know is going to hurt the other person in some way. It can be extremely difficult.

Two men who lived in a small village got into a terrible dispute that they could not resolve. So they decided to talk to the town sage. The first man went to the sage’s home and told his version of what happened. When he finished, the sage said, "You’re absolutely right." The next night, the second man called on the sage and told his side of the story. The sage responded, "You’re absolutely right." Afterward, the sage’s wife scolded her husband. "Those men told you two different stories and you told them they were absolutely right. That’s impossible—they can’t both be absolutely right." The sage turned to his wife and said, "You’re absolutely right."

Some people really like to avoid a conflict. I should know because I’m one of them. But conflict is a fact of life, in fact many have made the point that conflict, even within the Church is a sign of life--evidence of the fact that people really care. And avoiding confrontation is often a recipe for even greater conflict and pain.

But it’s hard. In fact, just talking about this topic is probably enough to make most of us squirm a little bit in our seats, make our blood pressure go up a few notches, or to get a little nervous. But so far I’m doing well though I think, as I don’t think anyone has left the room yet!

But this really does make us uncomfortable. And the church is one of those places that has a really hard time with this. We try to make everyone happy. We want everyone to like us. We

don't want to scare people off. So we try to please everyone. And it doesn't always work. Sometimes people leave, angry. Sometimes people disagree with a direction the council is taking on a particular issue. Sometimes people get so angry that they leave the church. Or – more likely – they quietly slip away. Sometimes we find out later that they have joined another church. Sometimes we don't. It's taken me a long time in life to realize that I can't make everyone happy. Pastor Saul can't make everyone happy. Even Ashley Shuck, church secretary extraordinaire, can't make everyone happy. And that's saying something.

So if we can't all always be happy, what good are we? If we can't always be satisfied, what good are we? What good are we as a church community if we aren't always happy about everything, all of the time? Should we just pretend that we're always happy? That everything's perfect? And keep on going pretending like nothing is wrong?

Are you familiar with the story of the Velveteen rabbit by Margery Williams? It's a story about a boy who receives a Velveteen Rabbit for Christmas. The Velveteen Rabbit is snubbed by some of the other better made and more expensive toys who think that they are real. One day while talking with one of the toys, the Skin Horse, the rabbit learns that real is not how you are made or how expensive you were, but that a toy becomes real if its owner really and truly loves it. One night, when the boy's china dog cannot be found, the Velveteen Rabbit takes its place and becomes the boy's constant companion. Over time the rabbit becomes shabbier, but the boy loves him no matter what.

While outside one day, the Velveteen Rabbit meets some very well-made toy rabbits with no seams (they are actual rabbits), and the Velveteen Rabbit learns about the differences between himself and the real rabbits.

His companionship with the boy lasts through the winter and the next summer, until the boy becomes sick with scarlet fever. The boy becomes too sick to play for very long at a time and upon his recovery, he is sent to the seaside on doctor's orders. The boy wants to take his rabbit with him, but his doctor says that not only can he not take the rabbit, but the doctor says it must be burned along with all the nursery toys in order to disinfect the house from the germs.

The boy is given a new plush rabbit with glass eyes and is so excited about the trip to the seaside that he forgets his old Velveteen Rabbit. Forgotten, rejected, in the bag with all the other infected toys, and waiting for the bonfire in which he will be destroyed, the rabbit cries a real tear. This tear summons the Nursery Magic Fairy. The rabbit thinks he was real before, but the fairy tells him he was only real to the boy. She flies him to the woods, where he realizes that now he is a real rabbit and he runs to join the other rabbits in the wild. The following spring, the

boy sees the rabbit hopping in the wild and thinks he looks like his old Velveteen Rabbit, but he never knows that it actually was.

In the story, there is this beautiful exchange between the Rabbit and the Skin Horse. “What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?” “Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.” “Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit. “Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.” “Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?” “It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

When you consider who or what is real in your life, you may notice that the real things are a bit weathered. It takes a long time to become real. Like the voice of Johnny Cash or Van Morrison. They’re not perfect. You may also notice that in everyday life, there is a higher cost for what is real: A fine steak, aged bourbon, genuine works of art or the sacrifices required for a good, real marriage. The price is high but the experience so much richer.

In today’s gospel reading, we’re given this wonderful gift of the Spirit of truth. We’re given this wonderful gift of being real with one another – where we can live in relationships where love is given and received. When we are real, we know what it means to love, and to be loved. As human beings, we were created for living in community, and to experience love in and through these communities.

According to the Bible, God’s desire for us is to live in community with others, to be authentic and to be real. Just as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist in community, we too are designed to live life in relationship with others. So, why is it so difficult for us to be real? One word sums up our problem, and that word is fear. If being real means being loved, what is the opposite of love? When I ask people this question, what is the opposite of love, the most frequent response is, hate. But I really do believe that the real opposite of love is fear. 1st John 4:18 says this nicely: *“There is no fear in love: but perfect love cast out fear ...”* (1 John 4:18a)

Fear keeps us from loving and being loved! It is fear that destroys relationships and keeps us from being authentic and real. Fear of being hurt keeps us from being vulnerable and developing close, healthy relationships. Fear of rejection keeps us from developing and investing in friendships, leaving us isolated and alone.

How many of you have used Instagram? Instagram is an app where you can post pictures online, and other people can see and comment on them. It's a social media app, like Facebook. But on Instagram, when you post a photo, you have the option to edit it—crop, adjust, zoom in, and change the colors. There are even these “filters” you can put on your photo—to bring up the warmth, adjust the hues, bring the focus in to one particular point. All allowing amateur photographers to take a basic phone photo and turn it into a work of art, if you will, taking a very average moment and making it look amazing. Now, I'm all about turning ordinary things into extraordinary—hey, Jesus took bread and said this is my body! But the Instagram effect is this—we use these photos, with their edits and filters, to give a false sense of ourselves. A more perfect sense of ourselves. It's like taking a before and after picture, but only showing the “after” picture to people.

At some point in the life of the church, we stopped being real about our weaknesses. We stopped sharing our broken places. We stopped being vulnerable. We limited our honesty. And yet, friends, we need each other. We don't need perfect versions of each other, we need the broken, defeated, grieving, exhausted, out of control versions of each other. We need to get messy in reconciliation, we need to be fed at communion, we need to celebrate at baptism. We need each other. We need to pass on a viable, living and breathing faith to the young people around us.

This is a beautiful sanctuary. I do not mean the wood, the brick, and the stained glass. This is a beautiful sanctuary because it is a place of relationships even broader and more daring than our communities and homes. Think about those opportunities that you have to live and grow in relationship with one another – with youth group activities, OWLS events, or even private conversations where we engage one another face to face, life to life. It is my hope and prayer for this community that we deepen our sense of community, of being a safe and beautiful home where we truly love one another.

And even when we fail, may we know the deep, abiding love of God, that goes with us, sustains us, encounters us, and never leaves us. May we know how loved and treasured we are, held in the loving, safe and secure arms of our triune God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.