***“Speaking the Truth”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, March 29, 2020

**Proverbs 13:3–6 NIV**

3Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin. . . 5The righteous hate what is false, but the wicked make themselves a stench and bring shame on themselves. 6Righteousness guards the person of integrity, but wickedness overthrows the sinner.

**Ephesians 5:15–16**

15But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

I want to start with the Proverbs. I think there is one lesson that more or less lies behind all three proverbs: that is, that there are moral consequences, and that dishonesty brings ruin, while righteousness brings good things. There is some very practical content, too. “Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin” (v. 3). This is useful advice in a monarchy, where rash words can get one killed.

But maybe we can apply that saying to a different time and place. Isn’t there something *inherently* destructive about rash and irresponsible speech, which leads to ruin? What goes around, comes around—to *oneself*, but it can also do harm to *others*. Harsh words degrade the level of public conversation. When lies and extremism are everywhere, then honest people hesitate to speak up. There is a moral imperative here. We have a responsibility not to speak rashly. Lazy or impulsive or thoughtless speech does damage to society.

With this moral insight, let us look at verse 5: “The righteous hate what is false, but the wicked make themselves a stench and bring shame on themselves.” Here we see that the evildoer brings ill repute on himself. But the righteous person has an inner light, with *discernment*, and therefore hates falsehood, cruelty, and lies.

Of course, the Christian viewpoint gives us added motive to speak with loving intent. As Ephesians says, “speaking the truth in love” leads us to “grow up in every way . . . into Christ” (Eph 5:15). Most scholars believe that the author of Ephesians is not Paul, but a close disciple of his. He builds on Paul’s own thought and takes it further, at least in the area of community. He says each of us is like a healthy body-part that “promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (5:16).

So, speaking the truth in love actually builds fellowship. Let me bring this down to earth even more: Helpful and kindly speech strengthens society. I have often had my mood lifted by someone saying something kind, or even funny, like a clerk in a store who says to me “hello, young man.” I’m about as young as the mountains and rivers, but it’s still *fun* to hear somebody say that. Then there’s a saying the British have, which I find very pleasant. They say “y’alright, love?”

Okay, these are mundane examples. But they still count. We can uplift any conversation by being considerate and sympathetic, or we can degrade it by being rude or contemptuous. We need to learn to be attuned to others. We have to be ready to encounter different personality types. It is good for us to *expect* that people are going to have different reactions and thoughts, and not to let it bother us.

In fact, we can find these personal differences intriguing and beautiful, if we get into the space Ephesians is talking about. Our different styles and emphases can contribute to the elegance of the tapestry we are jointly weaving. He writes “the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, is working properly” (5:16).

Well, how good it truly is when we work together! Let’s make it so! Let’s see if we can strengthen spiritual unity by our love of truth and goodness.

In working on this sermon, I was struggling to find a story that would embody the principal of speaking the truth in love, because I mostly came up with examples of people who heroically spoke the truth and were persecuted for it. Those stories matter, but for today I wanted to find a more encouraging tale.

I settled on C. S. Lewis, the author of *Mere Christianity* and the Narnia books. This great English writer is often embraced by conservative evangelicals nowadays, but by no means do his views on evolution, capitalism, or freedom fit comfortably in the conservative camp (see <https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/06/29/cs-lewis-was-a-red/>). He believed in natural law—the idea that there was a built-in attraction in all people toward the True and the Good, which he referred to with the Chinese term, the Tao. This view goes right against the idea that man is thoroughly evil, and has no moral compass.

And so I use Lewis as my example of someone who spoke the truth in love, whose views would challenge any kind of narrow-mindedness, who does not fit in *anybody’s* camp, and yet was influential in his day, and still admired today. We need *that* kind of truth-teller, someone who will challenge *all* our thinking.

Let me close some Lewis quotes: “If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth—only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin and, in the end, despair.” (*Mere Christianity*) “Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original; whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it.” (<https://www.azquotes.com/author/8805-C_S_Lewis/tag/truth>). “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken.” (*The Four Loves*; <https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/1069006.C_S_Lewis>). The truth Lewis spoke is realistic as well as idealistic. Things don’t always go easily when we speak the truth in love, but there’s no other way for humanity to have any future. There is no hope without truth.