

The Course of Witness

Living in Unity:

Ephesians 4:11-16

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I heard a funny story about a Unity Candle in a wedding. The Unity Candle is a large candle that the bride and groom light with smaller candles. Most often, the mothers of the bride and groom light the smaller candles before the ceremony, but they forgot. When the couple got to the vows, the wedding coordinator noticed the problem. She imagined the couple stopping in front of the candle, not knowing what to do. She pictured herself stopping the wedding to light the candles. She surveyed the sanctuary hoping to avoid those outcomes. Spotting a door to the choir loft, she thought she might unobtrusively light the candles by using a candle-lighter while hiding behind the church's choir railing. She grabbed a candle-lighter, bolted from the sanctuary and rushed to the spot. Confused, she opened some doors leading to closets, but quickly found the door to the choir loft. As she cracked open the proper door, she realized the lighting of the candle was seconds away. To avoid detection she lay down flat on her stomach and wiggled through the doorway. She startled the photographer who was hiding behind the choir railing. He was using a remote to control cameras documenting the ceremony. She pushed the stick with a flickering flame at him. He got the idea, took the lighter, raised it above the choir railing, and accomplished what the mothers forgot. Unity, at least symbolically, was preserved. It wasn't easy. It almost didn't happen. It required faith, action and cooperation.

For the past two months, we've discussed how to live in unity, for unity is both the place where blessing is bestowed and the means to great achievement. Preserving the unity God

creates requires our faith, action and cooperation. It requires taming our tongue, and some of us committed ourselves to a tongue-fast from complaining, gossip, deceit and negativity during Lenten-season. We also discussed the challenge of pride and choice of forgiveness. Today, I want us to see and pursue a mature unity. The Bible puts it this way:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13, NIV)

There are three goals. We are to reach unity in (1) *the faith*, (2) *the knowledge of the Son of God*, and (3) *become mature* – rising to the whole stature of Christ in his fullness. This unity comes (a) as we receive the leaders God sends to equip us (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers), (b) as we serve one another, and (c) as we speak the truth in love. The Bible says:

Instead (of being blown into attitudes and actions by good-sounding arguments circulating about), ***speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.*** (Ephesians 4:15, NIV)

Today I address *speaking the truth in love*. We are to speak the truth in love as God's witnesses. Jesus told his followers, "You will be my witnesses." As witnesses we don't judge what people do; instead, we testify about what we've heard, seen and experienced. On occasion, we are given temporary authority to judge. As a parent, I make judgment calls and decisions that affect my children while they are under my charge. As a pastor, I have temporary authority to make judgments and decisions. However, each pastoral decision can be reviewed by other human authorities; and every parent, pastoral and personal decision I make will be judged by God. Solomon wrote:

God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12: 14, NIV)

No person on earth gets away with anything. Every deed and every word will be exposed and evaluated. Jesus affirmed this truth. He said:

There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs. (Luke 12:2-3, NIV)

God's forgiveness will not remove this exposure or evaluation. My dirty laundry, including my sinful thinking, will hang in broad daylight and it will be judged for what it is. However, forgiveness removes the sentence for my misdeeds. Instead of penalties, God will lavish on all who are forgiven every blessing planned for his righteous children.

It is important then that we live and speak as witnesses, and act as judges only when it is our explicit responsibility. The tricky thing is that we often speak as judges without knowing it. A judge says, "*You're wrong!*" A witness says, "*I see things differently.*" A judge says, "*You've sinned.*" A witness says, "*I'm concerned because I understand your action violates God's commands.*" A judge says, "*You'll pay for that.*" A witness says, "*I fear you'll pay for that.*" A judge says, "*You're nice.*" A witness says, "*I appreciate you.*" A judge says, "*That's a good sermon.*" A witness says, "*I enjoyed your sermon.*"

We often intend our judgments to be compliments and opinions; and the words seem to work well. However, the way we speak, the habits we develop, can make it difficult to hold the hard conversations. When you share concerns, do you find people offended because they feel judged? Your attitude may be fine but your word choice could be problematic. Before I go further, I should say that some people will feel judged and offended no matter how we share a concern.

Jesus warned that if you speak the truth to the wrong person, they'll refuse to hear you, and also attack you. He said:

Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.
(Matthew 7:6, NIV)

Many times we may want to speak the truth when the time is not right. The person is not ready. If you share your concern then, you will be attacked. Occasionally, God may call you to do that. Certainly, if you are responsible for correction, you'll have to do it. I unapologetically upset my children on occasion. Conversely, many times when we see something destructive, we are to pray. God will use our prayers. However, we may have some close friendship where concerns are welcomed. Then our friends count on our honest feedback, and we are free to share.

However, Jesus warned us about attitudes when we desire to correct another. He said:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:1-5, NIV)

We need to be certain that our hearts are right and we are ready to hear about our own faults from the lips of the person we are about to confront. Indeed, do they hear more encouragement from us than concerns? If they hear more concerns than encouragement, we need to check our hearts. We are primarily witnesses to the truth of God's love.

Once, a friend and I led a youth mission trip. I was having trouble with the youth. They were excited, talkative and giving no attention to the crucial conversations we leaders needed to have with them. My patience wore thin as I repeatedly raised my voice, called them to attention

and commanded their silence. Finally, my friend quietly interrupted. He softly said to the young people, *“I’m hurt and angry. I feel disrespected when Wes and I try to give you important information and you don’t give us your attention.”* You could have heard a needle drop. None of the youth wanted to demean or offend us. They hadn’t contemplated the effect of their behavior. My attempts to control their behavior, including commands and threats, had little effect. My friend’s sincere witness changed the whole atmosphere.

Years later, as I trained to counsel both couples preparing for marriage and those struggling in marriage, I would begin coaching couples in the speech pattern my friend used with the youth. We helped couples change from the language of judges to the language of witnesses. As they practiced the speech of a witness, they found they could address many concerns without fighting.

Ask yourself do you speak like a judge or witness? Do you seek to control people with your words, or do you focus on revealing your heart? We are not talking technique. We are talking intent.

One day a young man brought a problem to me from work. His boss was making destructive decisions. The company would suffer severely if he continued. He had already brought up his concerns, and the boss saw him as a critic. What could he do? I told the young man that his job was not to control or second guess his boss. He was not to be the resident judge. Instead, he could be a witness who provides information for his boss to accept or reject as desired. In that way, he would be an asset; and in that way he became an asset.

In that same way, we are assets to one another. We are called to be witnesses that bless and build one another until we reach the unity of faith, knowledge and maturity of Jesus Christ. What a vision God has for us! He is calling us to respond and act in faith. Will you?