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"Bless Your Heart" The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (08/04/2024, The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost)

Let us pray. Almighty God made the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer, in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

I remember talking some years ago with a friend who had moved to the U.S. from overseas and had spent time in the North before moving to Texas, and I know there is a big debate as to whether or not Texas is really the South, but let's just say for the sake of argument for now that it is. We were talking specifically about what hospitality and friendliness look like in each culture, and his experience at least was that, as he said, people in the North to not to be friendly on the surface, but after a few months that exterior, cold, or iciness may thaw and warm, and these folks can be inviting and truly friendly. His experience was that getting in the door of that culture was harder, but that what lay within was really warm and kind. Now, on the other hand, his experience of the American South was just the reverse. He found that people were kind on the exterior, very kind, to a point that threw him at first, but that it was much harder to forge meaningful relationships beyond just that surface level of kindness. Now, this was one person, a small sample size, limited experience, but I do think it's fair to say that there is a certain strain of language and manners and gestures in the American South that do this and that do it on purpose, in fact. There is a kind of double speak in Southern life whereby we say one thing, which may be literally true on the surface, but means something very

different. And the best example of this is the phrase, bless your heart. Oh, y'all are with me already. I love it. Let's read what Wikipedia has to say. Bless your heart as a phrase common to the Southern United States. The phrase has multiple meanings and is used to express genuine sympathy, but sometimes as an insult that conveys condescension, derision, or contempt. It may also be spoken as a precursor to an insult to mitigate its severity, meanings range from sincerity to exasperation and are primarily imparted through context and tone. Again, if you haven't grown up in the South, this is something you have to learn. What is that meaning in that tone and how does it work? While common in the South, it is primarily used by individuals who wish to be sweet and do not wish to act ugly, which is a phrase I heard often from my grandmother. Okay, there's a clip from the show Young Sheldon, I think, that summarizes this really well. And if you don't know the context, just know that he is with some college professors who are Yankees and they're in a dive bar in Texas and they are trying to use the phone. And the woman behind the bar is not being too generous and kind to these Yankees, and so then Young Sheldon steps into hell. Now, my friend here is in need of help, and since our state model is literally free here, may he please use your phone. All right, all summarized for us really well. So I have felt over the years that there is a roughly biblical equivalent phrase to bless your heart. It's a phrase that people sometimes use when they want to say something without really saying it and when they want to act ugly without really doing so. So I want to talk about this passage from Ephesians this morning. Some of you have felt this, and I can tell, especially this phrase, speaking the truth in love. Often we assume that speaking the truth in love means that we get to say whatever we want to say, no matter how unkind or cruel, as long as we tag it, but with look, I say this with all the love in my heart, kind of like the phrase, bless your heart. Sometimes speaking the truth in love involves neither truth nor love. Unfortunately, this phrase has been used as a cudgel, a weapon to beat people over the head with bad theology, bad pastoral care, or a toxic combination of both.

Sometimes people just want to speak their truth and not the truth. The reason for this is simple. There's a lot of confusion, I think, over what three of the terms in this phrase mean, speaking and truth and love. And so I want to take each of them one by one. First of all, the writer of Ephesians does something really interesting with this phrase that is translated here speaking the truth in love. It's more literally translated as truthing a verb in love. And so in some older English translations, it looks like this from Tyndall's translation. Let us follow the truth in love from Wycliffe. Do we truth in charity? We do the truth. And in this one from the early 20th century, but we shall lovingly hold to the truth. So none of these actually uses the verb speaking, right? We have sort of these ideas of following and inhabiting and being the truth. And so I think you see my point that perhaps the deeper intention of the author of Ephesians is not to suggest that we speak a harsh word of judgment or correction to our fellow Christians and then just tag on in love and the end to make it palatable. But rather the emphasis on living out the calling to which we're called, both individually and as the church, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to truth, a verb, to truth in love, to perform the truth might be a better translation, performing the truth in love, doing the truth in love, living the truth in love, holding the truth in love. I was reminded that I was writing of this prayer in our prayer book. I don't expect you to read this, I promise. This is on page 101 in the prayer book. And so if you don't have one, you can grab one and look this prayer up or you can find it online. It's called the general Thanksgiving. It's a prayer that we Episcopalians are meant to say every day. It's in the morning prayer service for our tradition. This prayer Thanksgiving is not thanking God that we're righteous and that other people are not as the public and on the street corner did in the Gospels. It's not thanking God that we have the answers to truth and other people do not. It is not thanking God that we know the truth in that way. It is a relational prayer, a relational truth that defines our faith. And this is the phrase that I wanted to share with you. It says, and we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies that with truly thankful

hearts, we may show forth your praise not only with our lips, but in our lives. By giving up ourselves to your service and by walking before you and holiness and righteousness all our days. This is a beautiful expression of what speaking the truth in love looks like. Living the truth in the love of God, being aware, awake, alive to the mercies of God will enable us better to truth in love. Now the second thing I'd like to say about this phrase has to do with the word truth. We sometimes assume in the church that truth is a list of rules, or truth is a set of behaviors, or that truth means agreeing with a list of lifestyle choices that had been approved by the pastoral staff and rejecting those that haven't been. And so in this way speaking the truth in love is corrective. Your job is a good Christian to grab the steering wheel of an errant Christian's life and pull them back onto the road, back onto the right path, back onto the way of truth. Now it is true that the writer of Ephesians is concerned about false teaching and the deceptions of those who would lead the Ephesian church astray, but he's actually contrasting truth here as something living and active and embodied rather than following teachers whose job it seems to be to conceal and to deceive. This word, in other words, means something that is not concealed, something that is not hidden. In true thing in love we are following the lead of God, who in the first chapter of Ephesians is the one who has made known, the text says, God has made known what was previously hidden, what was previously secret. God has revealed this truth to the world. And that truth is that God has a plan to gather up all things in Christ. So truth here is a revelation, something revealed, something that can't escape notice, something that is not hidden, something that is not concealed, something that is evident and clear and plain to see. Truth is reality, not illusion. It is clarity, not obscurity. And most importantly for we Christians, truth is a person. A person, not an idea, a person, not a list of dues and don'ts, so person whose life is the fullest expression of God's love, the fullest revelation of God's love. When Jesus is asked in the Gospel of John, chapter 14, what does the way to the Father look like? That disciples seem to be asking for a map. They seem to be wanting the equivalent of the Ikea instructions for

following Jesus to God.
How do I put this thing together? What is the path? What is the way?
How do we get from point A
to point B? Just give us the list of rules, Jesus, and we'll follow
them. And Jesus says famously,
I am the path. I am the way. I am the instructions. I am the journey
and the destination both. I am the
truth. I am the reality. I am everything that God has made known about
God. So I think this
is the same problem that those crowds from our Gospel passage that
Kara read. They were
wanted to follow Jesus through Capernaum. They wanted this illusion
rather than reality. They
wanted the way or the path or the bread that Jesus could give rather
than the thing itself,
which is Jesus. Jesus is not telling the crowds that earthly bread is
unimportance. He's not
saying that we shouldn't feed ourselves with bread so that we can keep
our bodies healthy,
but so often we focus on the gift rather than the giver on that which
is limited and scarce
and temporary rather than that which is abundance and overflowing and
always readily available.
Finally in love. So speaking truth in love, the writer of Ephesians is
telling us to truth in love,
to live our lives in this truth, to live our lives in the light of
God's revealing,
which is the grace and mercy that flow from the heart of Jesus. So
when we do that,
when we live our lives as an extension of Jesus' life, a life full of
the love of God, a love that
is selfless, a love that is expansive and wide, a love does not seem
to close down and shut
down our lives, but instead opens them up to a world beyond anything
we could ask or imagine.
This love of God that has come to us in Jesus Christ is so radical and
scandalous.
Remember that this word scandal in the New Testament is used. It's
something that you put in
someone's way that they might trip over, right? And the love of God is
like that. It makes us
trip because we just can't see what it really is, how large it really
is. It doesn't respect our
human boundaries. It doesn't seek its own good, but the good of
others. It does not measure a
person's worth by any humanly constructed ruler, but only by the pure
love of God, the pure
goodness of God, the pure grace of God, poured out on everyone without
distinction, without measure,
without price. Why is any of this important? Why does any of this

matter? We like to say that we are living through times of deep division and suspicion, times in which truth is hard to come by, times in which nothing seems plain or open or clear, times in which no one seems to be interested in extending the benefit of the doubt to those on the other side of our divisions.

This phrase, speaking the truth and love, was intended exactly for people living in the same kind of situation. You had Jewish Christians in the early church, you had Gentile Christians in the

early church. There was deep, deep division and suspicion on both sides. And so the writer of

Ephesians is exploring what it means for Christians to live as one community. Out of this community

and emphasis that was deeply divided by what today we might call categories of race and ethnicity

and culture and religion and political belief. Out of that deep division he asks them, actually he

says, I beg you, to live a life of humility and gentleness and patience, to bear each other,

to hold each other up in love, to maintain the unity of God's Holy Spirit in a bond of peace.

So out of that deep division he calls them one body, one spirit. He reminds them of the one hope

of their calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, not two lords, one Jewish

and one Greek, not two faiths, one law and one grace, not two gods, but one, not two Holy Spirits.

But one. Against the spirit of division then he writes this with encouragement. Truthing in love we

must mature into the body of whom he is the head into Christ because Christ does not have two bodies.

But one, from that body we receive all that we need. For he is the bread of life,

he is the cup of salvation, he is the living water, and in him we are able to truth in love.

Let us pray, Almighty God, we thank you for the gift that you give us of this unity in Christ.

It does not always seem evident in our own hearts and in the hearts of others. We pray that you

would give us your Holy Spirit so that we may live the truth of your revelation the love of God

in Jesus Christ. In your name we pray. Amen.