

“Building Great Relationships Part 6: Practice Truth”

2 John 1-6

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Westminster Presbyterian Church

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This morning, we continue our sermon series on building great relationships. Our primary text has been Paul’s classic words on love from 1 Corinthians 13. So far, we have learned that a great relationship is built on love, a love that is patient and kind, a love that is not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude, a love that does not insist on its own way, nor is it irritable or resentful. Today, we discover that such love “does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.” And now to flesh out that concept, we are going to look at a complementary passage of scripture that is rarely if ever preached on in any church. It is not in any lectionary as far as I can tell. But nevertheless, it made the canon, and therefore it deserves a good scrutiny. So let us listen with attentive ears for God’s word as it comes to us from 2 John, the first six verses.

(Read text)

It is one of the classic movie scenes of all time. The 1992 film, “A Few Good Men” starred Tom Cruise as a young military lawyer who has been given the task of defending two marines accused of murder. They claimed they were acting on orders. Jack Nicholson, the other star, plays a tough guy marine officer. In the final climatic scene, Nicholson is on the stand being interrogated by Cruise. Cruise is getting frustrated and desperate, and he shouts out, “I want the truth.” And Nicholson yells back, “You can’t handle the truth.” It was a great theatrical moment as Nicholson then goes on to confess his involvement in the crime.

2 John was written for those who can handle the truth. It is the shortest of all the 66 books of the Bible. I think I would call it not a letter, but rather just a postcard. If you blink, you might miss it.

The author of this letter, along with 1 John and 3 John, is identified simply as “the elder.” While there is some debate, I would say that these three letters were written by the same John who wrote the gospel of John. Some of the things we know about John is that he was a fisherman, the brother of James and the son of Zebedee. I’ve heard he was likely the youngest of the disciples, very close to Jesus, and in one case was referred to as “the disciple Jesus loved.” According to tradition, he was the last surviving apostle and the only one to die of natural causes. The experts tell us he likely lived into his 80s and died in Ephesus.

To whom was this letter by John written? The text says, “to the elect lady and her children.” Who is this “lady”? Theories abound, and I know it’s entertaining to wonder about mysterious women, but the most convincing argument is that the lady elect is simply a symbolic term for a local congregation. We’re talking metaphor here. The lady is the church. And if the lady is the church, then of course her children would be the church’s members.

Whether we interpret “lady” literally or figuratively, the meaning stays the same. The First Century church was going through growing pains. Pressure abounded from inside and out. False teachers arose both within the church and outside the church who were deceiving people into turning away from the truth of the Gospel. Persecution ran rampant throughout the church, especially as this new movement called Christianity was gaining steam throughout the Roman world.

John writes to warn Christians of the dangers they face and of their need to take action. John writes at the beginning of his letter that he knows the truth and the truth abides in the church and will always be in the church forever. The operative word here for John is “truth.” The action steps needed are rather simple: First, they must know the truth. Second, they must walk in the truth. Know the truth. Walk in the truth. Good advice for those of us who want to build better relationships.

How do we know the truth? Jesus himself once said, “I am the way, the *truth*, and the life” (John 14:6). At the heart of our faith, we proclaim the very foundation of truth not in some philosophy or principles of life or magic rituals; we see truth very simply in the person of Jesus Christ, who he was, who he is, what he did. Truth is that God is love, we discover in first John. Jesus is love, a love that is revealed most clearly on the cross, where at the end of his earthly life, Jesus looked down on humanity and with great compassion said, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Jesus loved us so much he willingly gave his life on our behalf.

And so we see that truth is love, God’s love, a love that doesn’t end, a love not based on emotion, but a love that is based on the dogged determination to never let go of the other. It’s called *agape* love here in the Greek. *Agape* love is not passion with its ebbs and flows and its off and on switches. *Agape* love is, as I once heard, “undefeatable goodwill; it is the attitude towards others which, no matter what they do, will never feel bitterness and will always seek their highest good of others,” even when there is great difficulties. Do you know that love? Have you experienced it? If you have experienced that love from God, then you know the truth. John makes the point clear.

However, it is not enough to just *know* the truth. That is the beginning, yes. But just as important, if not more so, you must *walk* in the truth. I love that metaphor of walking. Its roots go deep in ancient Jewish tradition. Isaiah said, “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord” (2:5). He also said, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord...that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths” (2:3). In Proverbs, it says, “I walk in the way of righteousness, in the paths of justice” (8:20).

As we move from Old to New Testament, what does such walking look like? John calls the church to “walk in the truth.” That is the commandment of love. As John says in his first letter, “If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” As he quotes Jesus in his Gospel, “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34, 35). You hear that, we love, because he first loved us. There is no greater truth than that.

At another time, Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” And what was his commandment? First and foremost, to love one another. Therefore if we don’t love one another, we don’t love God. If we love God, we will obey. That is, we will practice truth. That is, we will walk in his ways.

But man, that can be hard! In our homes, there are times when we would rather do anything than allow love to rule. It would be much easier to go ahead and get mad and seek your own interest and retaliate. At times, it’s like love is opposed to the senses. The senses have been trained to put themselves and their desires above anything else. They’ve been trained to seek their own way. But love, the Bible tells us, doesn’t insist on its own way, nor does it rejoice in wrongdoing, in retaliation. Love rejoices in truth. And so we walk in love.

Only love can mend a broken relationship. Rebuke and criticism and argument are liable to awaken only resentment and hostility. Love is the one thing that can restore a lost relationship. There is no question that at times, love hurts. It’s tough. But there is also no question that love heals. Whether we are married or not, we all need to hear that and understand that. Love hurts, but love heals.

Walking in truth, however, applies to more than just interpersonal relationships at home. There has been lots of talk about what ails the church. We’ll hear a lot more about that next month when General Assembly meets in Minneapolis. Whatever your spin on the state of the church is, the truth is the first cure of the church is not

sound doctrine or theology, as important as that is. We may have different views on Biblical interpretation or on this or that social issue. The first cure of the church, however, is love. We are to be obedient to God's commandment to love. To love when it's tough. To love when we disagree. That is how we can have better relationships in the church and in our homes. That is how we practice truth!

Love and truth go hand in hand—like peanut butter and jelly, ham and eggs, Laurel and Hardy. This reminds me of two very important elements of the earth. Sodium is an extremely active element found naturally only in combined form; it always links itself to another element. Chlorine, on the other hand, is a poisonous gas that gives bleach its offensive odor. When sodium and chlorine are combined, the result is sodium chloride, which is what? Yes, common table salt, the substance we use to preserve meat and bring out its flavor.

Love and truth can be like sodium and chlorine. Love without truth is flighty, sometimes blind, willing to combine with various doctrines. On the other hand, truth by itself can be offensive, sometimes even poisonous. Spoken without love, it can turn people away from the Gospel. When truth and love are combined in an individual or a church, however, then we have what Jesus called “the salt of the earth,” and we are able to preserve and bring out the beauty of our faith. Love and truth are inseparably connected.

Friends, are you walking in truth and in love? Parents, how is your walk? Are you modeling godly behavior for your children. Are you praying, reading the scriptures, worshipping God with your whole heart, and perhaps most importantly are you serving and loving others? Our kids are watching us closely, even when we think they are not. What message are we sending? Are we walking in truth and love?

Today is Father's Day, and I can think of no more appropriate message for myself and all you other fathers out there: walk in the truth. You know, I want to be known as a fun dad, someone whose children actually like having as a Facebook friend. I want to be a confidante to my children. I want to be a great coach for them in their athletic pursuits. I want to be a good provider. I want to be their number one cheerleader in the game of life. I want to be a voice of wisdom in their world, especially when times get tough for them. I want to be all that and more.

In all this, there has been a mixture of successes and failures in my fathering, as perhaps there has been in yours. But perhaps more than anything, I want to be one who practices truth and walks in love. There is no better and no truer legacy than that. Especially on this day, may that be our prayer. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

God of truth, the One who is the way, the truth, and the life, only in you can we find the very source of our life. Only in you can we find meaning and purpose. Only in you can we discover eternal life. Only in you! So we turn to you, the Creator of all that is, our rock and our salvation, and we say “thank you.”

We thank you for every breath of life that comes our way. We are grateful for our senses of taste, touch, sight, hearing, smelling. What a wondrous gift you have given in our very lives, and we live in awe of your beautiful and majestic creation. We are grateful that we are fearfully and wonderfully created from the dust of the earth. From dust we came and to dust we shall return. Indeed we live our lives in your hands and we are eternally indebted.

We pray for those in our midst this day who are suffering. We lift up Nicole Lock, Jane Adcock, Mike Partee, and Anne Elliott and pray your healing touch upon them. We remember longtime member, Jane Taylor, who died this past week and entered into the church triumphant. We thank you for her witness and pray your comfort upon her family. We also list up Doris Miller in the loss of her brother-in-law this past week and Mary McClanahan in the loss of her mother.

Father God, we pray for our mission team in Honduras at this very moment and pray for your blessing upon them and their work. We pray for the ministry of Compassion International and ways that this church might partner with them in ministry to reach “the least of these.” We pray not only for ourselves and those we hold near and dear to our hearts. But we pray also for those we don’t know, but those we are confronted by crisis. Especially this day, we pray for all those adversely affected by the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Our hearts are heavy for that threat to the beauty of your creation and for the widespread impact that disaster is now having.

Lord, we also pray for our fathers. We thank you for their witness in our lives for your love. Where they have fallen short, we pray for the courage to forgive. What an awesome responsibility it is to be a dad. Give us wisdom and guidance as we seek to walk the path of godly fathering.

And finally, we pray for the Holy Spirit to come into us in new ways. Enliven us and make us into new creations. Help us to practice truth and walk in love everywhere we go. Strengthen our marriages and our families. Help us to build strong relationships with those around us. Help us to build our house on the rock of Jesus Christ. Hear us now as we close with the Lord’s Prayer, saying...

Liturgy for WPC Worship—June 20th 2010—Scott Huie

Theme: To build better relationships we are called to practice truth. We are to know the truth and walk in the truth, and the truth is God is love!

*Call to Worship

L: I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?

P: My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

L: He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

P: He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

L: The Lord is your keeper; for the Lord is your shade at your right hand.

P: The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

L: The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

P: The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

*Processional Hymn #58 “This Is My Father’s World”

Prayer of Confession

Patient God, we come again to admit that we have honored you with our lips while our hearts were far away. We have taught doctrines from our own limited understanding, and held fast to our human traditions as if they embodied your will and eternal truth. We have filled our minds with evil thoughts that lead to destructive deeds. We are truly sorry for the many ways we have defiled your creation. We beg for your forgiveness and the opportunities for new beginnings...(our prayer continues in silence). Amen.

Minute for Mission

Compassion International

Moment with Our Children (9 and 11:15)

Mike Garrett

A Video Tribute to Our Fathers (9 and 11:15), videographer, Eric West

Scripture Reading

2 John 1-6

Sermon

“Practice Truth”
(6th in the Sermon Series: Building Great Relationships”)

Scott Huie

*Hymn of Faith (11:15) “O for a Closer Walk with God” (either #396 or #397 in the blue hymnal—Donna please advise. If not good one, maybe “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”)

Offertory “Conversations” by Sara Groves Kim Fratesi soloist. (9 and 11:15)

*Hymn of Mission #284 “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love”