

“Frankly Speaking”

Sermon – June 23, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

“I gotta be honest with you.” <pause> How do you react when someone says that to you? Like me, you probably aren’t thinking, “Wow! This should be good. I look forward to hearing what they have to say!”

No, the implication is that the person is unhappy with something you said or done and they haven’t said something to you yet probably to avoid a confrontation but now it’s too big a deal not to deal with it.

While I try to treat others with respect and be collaborative in decision-making, I have had occasions where I inadvertently said or did something that someone thought wasn’t cool.

Generally, I am glad that someone *was* willing to be forthright with me so I could correct the error or at least learn for the future. But sometimes I have been defensive, either out of pride or insecurity.

And sometimes *I* have been the one that said, “I gotta be honest with you” in the spirit of providing feedback to someone who may not aware how their words or actions are having a negative impact on me or others.

Today’s epistle passage is along those lines. We forget sometimes that when Paul was writing his letters to the various churches in the area his intent was not to write “scripture” but to address problems and issues the various churches were having. We also know we don’t have all the letters he wrote.

In fact, what we call “Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians” is actually a patchwork of letters where Paul reveals the inner dimensions of his life of prayer, and the lengths he is willing to go to convey his passionate love and concern for this community.

“Frankly Speaking”

Sermon – June 23, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

We call these “epistles” because that is Greek for “letters” and because these were written in particular style as from teacher to student, so we want to distinguish them from other kinds of letters.

Still, that does not mean that aren’t deeply personal as today’s passage indicates. Despite his work with the Corinthians other so-called “super apostles” have come in, leading the Corinthians in a different direction and casting aspersions on Paul.

Partly it’s because Paul’s mouth has gotten him into trouble, though not in the way you might think. In verse 11 Paul writes, “We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians.” The actual Greek phrase is “speaking with an open mouth” and was a synonym for “frank speech.” That is, letting the words flow freely with no fear to soften or censure them.

For the ancients, telling it like it is no matter whose feelings are hurt and no matter what the consequences were the most important trait of a public leader. And that’s the beef these “super-apostles” have with Paul.

They say, “Sure, he talks tough when writing letters safely from distance, but when he’s in person he’s all mildness, gentleness, and emphasis on grace.”

There is also the issue that the Corinthians see that Paul and his companions are not popular.

From the outside they see the apostles’ suffering, much of it at the hands of authorities. They see apostles lacking the respect of the world. They see apostles treated as impostors by the wider culture

What continues to strike me as I read about the early days of the church in scripture are the parallels to today—2000 years later: Christians who

“Frankly Speaking”

Sermon – June 23, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

“tell it like it is” but really is “tell it like it is that is good for me”, who insist on symbols being revered like graven images while neglecting and oppressing actions that those symbols stand for, and putting down anyone perceived as meek and mild as weak and contemptible.

I find it challenging to deal with such attitudes and behavior. Paul did as well. But Paul did not give up—hence, he wrote his letters.

We often interpret Paul’s grand statements about reconciliation in abstract theological terms. We tend to forget that Paul wrote these passages in response to some very specific—and painful—difficulties he was having, in this case with the Corinthian congregation

Paul is not dealing with doctrinal disagreements but something very personal, something to do with his relationship with the church at Corinth.

As Paul writes in verse 1, “As we work together with [Christ], we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.” He is upset with how they now view him but primarily because they are ignoring his message about the gospel that he sees God called him to spread.

In the ancient world, responsibility for initiating the mending of a ruptured relationship was understood to rest with the party that caused the injury. In political contexts, this work was normally entrusted to an ambassador. Paul sees that in Christ, God completely overturns conventional expectations.

Here it is God who is injured by people’s sinfulness and rejections. Yet God takes the initiative to heal the ruptured relationship and reconcile the world to himself. Paul understands his own calling to be that of an

“Frankly Speaking”

Sermon – June 23, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

ambassador for Christ, through whom God entreats the injuring party to be reconciled to God.

Reconciliation with God would naturally include reconciliation with Paul as God's ambassador. Paul continues his appeal in today's by quoting Isaiah 49:8, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you."

Then, applying it directly to the Corinthians, he writes in verse 2: "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!"

Paul urges the Corinthians to accept the reconciliation offered now, in this acceptable time, on behalf of Christ.

As servants of God, he and his cohorts have commended themselves, not with impressive speech or displays of power, but with their great endurance for the sake of the gospel in the midst of all manner of suffering. They have endured afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger as described in verse 4 and 5.

Like the Corinthians, churches today struggle to know how to live faithfully. Though we may talk a good game about forgiveness and reconciliation, we often balk at taking the risks inherent in truly living a ministry of reconciliation, even within the church.

Often, both parties in a conflict feel they have been wronged by the other, and neither is willing to risk the vulnerability and potential humiliation of seeking reconciliation.

We would much rather nurse our wounds and grudges than do the hard and humbling work of mending broken relationships. And this is not just within the church or even society, but in our personal relationships as

“Frankly Speaking”

Sermon – June 23, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

well with family, friends, and co-workers. All relationships require care and nurturing and, where broken, repair and reconciliation.

While that might sound daunting to you as individual, the good news is you are not alone. Note that Paul writes here (and elsewhere), “we work together”, “We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you.”

Paul did not work alone; he always had companions working alongside him. Though it may have been different people at different times, he had support.

In the first century people understood themselves as primarily persons-in-community, not as autonomous individuals. And that is what is missing today. Not to subsume the individual into a monolithic entity, but for the individuals to bring their own time and talents to benefit others, which is good for the whole.

Living the gospel is not solitary work; it takes solidarity to stand up against a culture that does not respect the values of God’s justice, and to endure its punishment. And yet we must.

As John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, said—but is true for most of us—“I have often repented of judging too severely, but very seldom of being too merciful.”

Frankly speaking, “too merciful” is not the problem in our society today.

Let’s try to change that. Together. In Christ.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.