

## Sermon: Uh-Oh

Year B, Proper 14

[1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51](#)

Offered August 9, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

Paul was worried about the church at Ephesus. Paul was always worried about all the churches he founded. And with good reason. Christianity wasn't even a thing yet. Still Paul's personal encounter with Christ had changed Paul's life and he was eager to help more people have that experience.

Yet Paul was not worried about individuals, or, at least, he was worried about the churches more. He knows that to have an individual experience of Christ, you need to come into contact with others — to share, to learn. He wants the churches he founded to be healthy and strong, so they can continue to build the beloved community that Christ had urged all of his followers to contribute to.

Paul's apparently an educated and worldly guy. His Greek is the literary kind. He was trained as a Jewish scholar. Before his conversion to Christ on the road to Damascus, he went around enforcing Jewish religious law. Even before all his church founding activity, he had travelled more widely than most people. So he wasn't fresh off the rutabaga truck.

And he was a practical guy. When we read his letters (most of the epistles in the New Testament are from him or his followers), we see him handling questions about eating and drinking, about marriage and family, how to live a daily life as a Christian. All the theory's in favor of feet-on-the-ground practice. In today's passage, he says that thieves must give up stealing, not because they're breaking a commandment (which they are!) or because it's bad for their moral fiber, but because if they pursue honest work they'll have more the share with the needy.

Ephesus itself was a leading Roman city of that side of the Mediterranean. So even if the church was drawn from the part of society that had less power, those people are not off the rutabaga truck either. And if they came of the part of society that had less in the world, they were all the more practical for it. They knew how to make what they had go further; they knew not to follow advice from big thinkers who had never worked in the real world.

So this practical guy sends advice to these down to earth people about how they can best get along with each other and form a strong community. And the first piece of advice he gives? *Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors* (Ephesians 4:25). Clearly this man has never had neighbors before.

"How are you?" "You know, the heat was really bothering me, I don't think I'm getting enough iron and my daughter is dating a guy who's going to end up in a wanted poster." No. You say, "I'm fine." Telling the truth may be the best way to blow a community up.

In fact, it's not obvious to me that Paul ever had a family. She says to you, "Does this skirt make me look fat?" Apparently Paul wants you to chose between, "No the skirt doesn't make you look fat" and "well, you are carrying a little extra in the trunk these days." Or he says to you, "I'm cleaning out the garage today." Telling the truth leads to something like, "Well, technically, you're moving about a quarter of what's in the garage into the only free space, possibly in the driveway, then getting engrossed in some minute task until about 6:00pm, at which time you'll

either put everything back where it was or leave it, thinking that you'll get to it after work tomorrow.”

We hear the people we live with say something about a skirt or the garage, and we think, “Uh-oh.” And the only thing we are reasonably sure of is that telling the truth is not going to help us stay in loving relationship with them. In fact, it may mean someone’s sleeping on the sofa.

Paul isn’t an idiot, and neither is the community he’s writing to. So let’s assume that Paul intends for us to tell the bigger truth. “How are you?” “I’m sure I’ll remember this weather longingly in January.” “Does this skirt make me look fat?” “You always look gorgeous to me.” “I’m cleaning out the garage today.” “Goodness knows it could use it.” All true and we remain *living in love* (Ephesians 5:2) just like Paul asked.

The thing is, Paul says why he wants us to tell the truth: *for we are members of one another* (Ephesians 4:25). He means we are part of the same physical body, just like your arm is a member of your body. We don’t tell ourselves lies, so we shouldn’t tell one another lies. That’s the really big “uh-oh” in Paul’s theory. We avoid the truth with ourselves all the time.

Because when you ask about the skirt, you already know the answer. If you didn’t think it made you look fat, you wouldn’t ask. That’s why answering the question is so tricky. As the person being asked that question, you can’t figure out what question you are really being asked. “Can you reassure me you are still attracted to me?” “Should I worry about aging?” “Is my parents’ drama beginning to play out with us?” Even though a lot of spouses have heard the same sequence of words, “Does this skirt make me look fat?”, they’ve really been asked a million different questions.

Why make an announcement about the garage when you know in your heart of hearts it’s a huge project that simply won’t yield to one day’s work by one person. Do you want them to stop you? Do you want them to help? Do you want them to finally let go of the cello, last played in 1987? Whatever is truthfully going on, it’s probably not a statement about cleaning out the garage.

If we are to be as honest with each other as we are with ourselves, then we’re really in trouble. Combine that with Jesus’ promise today in the passage from John, *whoever believes has eternal life* (John 6:47) and the “uh-oh” just gets louder. It might even escalate to an “oh, man.” Because who wants to pass eternity in a snug skirt with a garage you can’t drive a car into?

Think again about Paul’s list of the things we are supposed to do: speak truth, be angry (but do not sin), be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving of one another, living in love. Think again of his list of don’ts: don’t let the sun go down on your anger, don’t make room for the devil, no stealing, let no evil talk come out of your mouth, put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and all malice.

That actually sounds like a decent way to spend eternity. But then go back to his argument about telling each other the truth because we tell ourselves truth. We don’t tell ourselves the truth all the time. But neither are we kind to ourselves, tenderhearted or forgiving. But we can sure get going on the internal evil talk with all its attendant bitterness and wrangling and malice.

Think about it for a second. You’re standing on the sideline of your kid’s soccer game. You look up when everyone shouts because your team has just scored a goal. You didn’t see it because you were looking at your phone. You say under your breath, “I’m such a crappy dad.” If your best friend had said that in your hearing, you would have challenged him. “Dude, you’re here. So long as you catch more than you miss, you’re doing fine.” With someone else,

especially with someone we have a real relationship with, often times we can be more tenderhearted and forgiving than we are with ourselves.

So that may be the real feet-on-the-ground, practical advice that Paul is offering. Get into relationship with one another, so you can be kind and tenderhearted and forgiving of one another. Live in love. Because you might figure out how to live in love with yourself. Then the anxiety that's leading to the behaviors that are making the skirt too snug and the garage too cluttered might be easier to tackle. Plus you'd have someone to help you tackle them.

Most of us can put up with just about anything for a certain amount of time, especially if we know that time is bounded. Paul's trying to remind us that following Jesus is a beyond life long commitment. It's an eternal choice. We can start growing in this life to be the people we want to be in eternity. We can help each other grow. We can get rid of some of the "uh-oh"s in our time together. Because that time is going to be a long one.