

Rebuilding Trust
Ephesians 4:1-3, 14-16

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But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. Eph. 4:14

Few faculties of contemporary American society are more in need of restoration than the capacity to trust.

We are living in an age of suspicion and there seems to be very little trust among us. Go through the list. Politicians aren't trusted. Police aren't trusted. Journalists are trusted. The vaccine isn't trusted. The judicial system isn't trusted. The Christian church isn't trusted. Hardly any leadership of any kind is trusted.

This lack of trust is detrimental to a well-functioning society. A society without the capacity to trust is a society at risk of collapse. Trustworthiness has to be at the heart of our infrastructure if we are to have community on the small scale and anything close to national unity on the large scale.

The work of rebuilding the infrastructure of trust has to be personal. No one can *make* another soul trustworthy. The only way to increase the amount of trustworthiness in society is to *be* trustworthy ourselves.

What makes for trustworthiness? We can turn to the New Testament Letter of Ephesians for ideas. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians is apropos to our need because it seems to come out of much the same situation as we face today. Ephesians seems to understand that the early Christians lived in an atmosphere of untrustworthiness. The passage I have selected for our study today calls out the prevalence of trickery, deceit, and scheming as if around every corner there was someone ready to dupe and to selfishly mislead the unsuspecting.

In light of such conditions then and now, how are Christians to work at rebuilding society's lost capacity to trust? We cannot *make* anyone trustworthy. We can only work at *being* trustworthy ourselves. Ephesians can help us see how. We can pick up its teaching at chapter four.

The way to be trustworthy is to be a person of integrity.

Someone who was very important to me when I first started out as a minister, a neighboring pastor, used to define integrity as actually being on the road you say you are on.

That is just Paul's plea to the Ephesians. He challenges them to be on the road they say they are on. You say you are Christians, he says to them; then act like the Christians you say that you are. Live a life worthy – a life that measures up – to the calling to which you have been

called. He gives a list of personality traits that become a Christian. Paul loves lists. His many lists are never exhaustive. But they point in the direction Paul wants to go. Here he says a Christian is a person who acts with humility, patience, forbearance, and gentleness. That is what a Christian is, says Paul. You Ephesians say you are Christians. Well then act that way. Measure up to the ideal. Live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

There was once a man named Howard Thurman (1899-1981). He was an African-American minister, teacher, and writer. Not long after WWII Howard Thurman was serving as Chaplain at Boston University. One night during his time there a young Japanese woman, a nurse, already alone in the city, estranged from her family, and largely without friends took her own life. She had just watched a movie that was set during WWII and which portrayed the Japanese as less than human. Already beset with loneliness and feelings of rejection and of not fitting in, this young Japanese woman saw the movie's portrayal of her people and could not stand it anymore. She took her life. Somehow her funeral fell to Howard Thurman to conduct. People wondered what he would do. Many churches at that time weren't open to conduct the funerals of suicide victims. Many churches were still distrustful of the Japanese. Howard Thurman decided to act like a Christian. He lovingly conducted this young woman's funeral. Construction workers laboring nearby stopped to watch, and moved closer when the little gathering from inside the chapel came outside to the waiting hearse. They were curious. How was this delicate situation being handled? A number of these construction workers were so impressed with Thurman's dignity and integrity that they and their families later began worshiping with Thurman at the Boston University chapel.¹ Thurman earned their trust by behaving with integrity; he lived a life worthy of the calling to which he was called.

That's our first insight from Ephesians. Being a person of integrity is a way to be trustworthy and to inspire an increase in society's capacity to trust.

The way to be trustworthy is to be truthful in your speech.

One theory is that Paul wrote the Letter to the Ephesians when he was in prison in Rome near the end of his life.² He calls himself a prisoner at the start of chapter four. The theory that Paul wrote Ephesians from Rome makes sense to me, and it helps me understand our passage for today.

Paul had a frightening experience when he was being taken to Rome as a prisoner. You can read about it in Acts 27. He was taken to Rome by sea. While they were at sea, a terrible storm threatened the ship. It was battered by the wind and the waves. The crew, in an effort to stabilize the ship as much as possible and to keep it from being blown incredibly off course, put down a sea anchor (Acts 27:17). A sea anchor, as I understand it, looks something like a parachute. It is thrown into the water and it opens up as kind of a counter-force against the rolling sea and holds the ship in place.

I wonder if Paul had that experience – he had to have it, I think – in the back of his mind when he wrote to the Ephesians after he got to Rome. The way he writes of the conditions in

¹ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 184-185.

² "Ephesians," *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by Henry Snyder Gehman (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), p. 270.

Ephesus calls to mind a ship caught in a storm at sea. He writes of winds that toss people to and fro, making life almost completely unstable because of gale-force trickery and deceit. Ephesus, he seems to say, is in the midst of a kind of storm. And look what he tells the people to do. Was he thinking of the ship's crew that set out a sea anchor? Speak the truth, Paul says. When there is a gale of lies, speak the truth. It can be a kind of sea anchor that can act as a counter-force and keep society of drifting far off course.

“Plant truth,” said an old preacher who once lived at the edge of the English Channel, “plant truth, and the errors will pine away.”³ Truth-telling is a sea anchor that can help bring stability.

There is our second insight from Ephesians. The two that we have are these: being a person of integrity is a way to be trustworthy and to inspire an increase in society's capacity to trust and being a person who is truthful in your speech is a way to be trustworthy and to inspire trust.

The way to be trustworthy is to be loving in your intentions.

If you are following along with our passage you can see that the word *love* is used three times in these verses. It may be the only word that is repeated; it is certainly the only key word that is repeated. It is like a thread that runs through the whole.

The kind of love that is referred to here is *agape* love; *agape* is the Greek word that is repeated in this text. *Agape* love is love that is focused on the good of the other but not because of anything in the other that attracts love. *Agape* isn't love that is drawn forth because of the other's person or beauty or character or any such thing. It is a decision to love independently of anything about the other. *Agape* is love completely without self-interest.

Now we can immediately recognize that love without self-interest is a necessary qualification for trustworthiness. The self-interested person is almost never trustworthy. When I try on a suit at the clothing store and the salesman tells me that that suit is slenderizing, I know he is simply telling me what I want to hear so he can get the sale he wants. I've yet to meet a suit coat that is slenderizing. My point is that the self-interested person isn't trustworthy because the self-interested person says what they think people want to hear so they can get what they want, whether it is our money, our vote, our body, our allegiance, or what-have-you.

The trustworthy person acts out of *agape*: disinterested love or love that is completely without self interest.

And there is our third insight from Ephesians. Being a person who is loving in your intentions is a way to be trustworthy and to inspire an increase in society's capacity to trust.

The way to be trustworthy is to be guided by Christ.

Our passage from Ephesians refers to Christ as the head of the body.

³ James McGraw, *Great Evangelical Preachers of Yesterday* (New York: Abingdon, 1961), p. 104-105. The preacher referenced is Frederick W. Robertson.

You may be more familiar with another New Testament passage that speaks of the church as a whole as the body of Christ, each part with its own purpose – the eyes, the nose, the ears, and so forth; the point there being that each one of us has an important and necessary part to play in the life of a whole and healthy church (cf. 1 Cor. 12).

This Ephesians passage speaks of the church as a body, too, but differently. In this image Christ is not the whole body but the head. That is to say Christ is the command center of the Christian, the one under whose authority we are to live. The hand does not move without the head telling it to; the foot does not step without the head giving it its direction. Christ is the head, the Master, the Lord.

Now this, of all that we have said thus far, is the chief way to be a trustworthy person: let Christ be your authority for all that you think, say, and do. Let Christ be the one who gives you your direction. Let him be the one after whom you pattern your behavior. Let Christ be the ruler of your life. In the language of Ephesians, grow up into him who is the head.

Here, then, is a way to restore to our society the capacity to trust. That capacity, which is terribly important to the infrastructure of local community and national unity, is terribly deteriorated just now. The only way we can rebuild it and make it any better is by being trustworthy ourselves. And trustworthiness calls for us to be people of integrity who are truthful in our speech, loving in our intentions, and guided by Christ in all our actions.