

“The Trouble with Truth”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 4:21-30

Sometimes I think my life would be easier if I were better at telling lies. If you have been on retreat with me, you know that in a game, I am a fantastic liar. I can have a room convinced a story belongs to me, when really it belonged to someone else in the game. A straight face combined with the imaginary halo people place over a pastor's head, whether it is deserved or not, certainly helps with the charade. But that's just when it is fun and games.

In the day-to-day, ordinary events of my life, I have a harder time lying. There was the time I canceled on a friend's 50th birthday party because I was tired after church. I felt bad about letting down my friend, so I imagined what excuses I could tell her: I could say that I fell ill, or that Chris had to take off on a sudden trip for work and I had to stay home with the kid, or that Chris was flying away for work AND we were ALL sick... *with measles*.

But day to day, I figure the truth is usually a good enough story to tell. I ended up just telling Debra that I had been up too late writing my sermon and that I just crashed after church with no energy left to travel to the city. I promised to treat her to a birthday dinner. She seemed to turn 50 happily even without my presence.

I actually find it pretty easy to *not* tell lies for day-to-day things. However, *telling the truth* about something that *really matters* is much harder. And it is not so much that we lie instead of telling the truth. It is more likely that we avoid the truth. It is so much easier to skate by, doing what everybody else is doing, what they expect of us. Not making waves. So we avoid the important conversations, or we scratch at the surface of how people present themselves without having conversations that can actually reveal and transform what is on the heart. For instance, you may write off a friend, dismiss him because he did something disappointing rather than have a conversation that shows you value your relationship enough to search for its healing rather than to part ways. You may keep secret a cancer diagnosis because you do not want to be the downer friend. Because we don't want to make things uncomfortable, we don't call out

a loved one's racism, or a colleague's alcoholism. We know the truth can be troubling, so we choose to stay silent.

Another trouble with truth is that it can sound different depending on who is speaking it. If anyone saw the video that went viral last month of an encounter between a white, Catholic schoolboy and a Native American elder, you may have felt outraged. I certainly was, and I mentioned the encounter in my sermon. A day later, different videos emerged, and different stories unfolded about what happened, with each one presenting their version of the truth. The incident became a Rorschach blot of how you understand the divisions in this country. It makes you wonder, "why bother to speak the truth when there are so many competing truths out there?"

Jeremiah knew how troubling the truth can be. Even though he was only a boy, he resisted God's call, saying, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy!" But God replied, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you." With that, God touched the boy's mouth and told him, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Jeremiah was part of a history of prophets who pleased the people greatly when they shared words that were about building and planting. But woe to the prophet who proclaimed a word about plucking up and pulling down!

Jesus' message sounded good at first, like truth we want to hear. He read from the scripture in Isaiah, a familiar message to the faithful. The people from his hometown, who knew him as a boy growing up under Mary and Joseph's care, nodded their heads in approval, amazed to see what this boy had become. If he had stopped there, they could have enjoyed a nice coffee hour afterwards, maybe even with bagels. But then he went on-- he had to go and push these people who thought they knew him. He warns them that "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." This was Jesus' warning that his next words were going to make them uncomfortable. "The truth is," Jesus tells them, and then goes on to tell how the prophet Elijah was sent to the one widow who was so poor that she was about to prepare the last of grain in her jar so that she and her son may have their very last meal... and die. Jesus then tells them about the prophet Elisha, who sought out for healing a man who was a Syrian leper. Both examples Jesus gave were not the expected chosen ones: they were Gentiles, not Jews. One was poor and a woman, and the other had a disease that ritual law would have named him unclean.

So instead of stoking the hometown pride, instead of rallying the people around a God who was on their side alone, Jesus spoke a truth about God's power and compassion as something that is available for all, and especially those on the margins, not only for some. How many people do you think will be praying today that God help their favored team win the Super Bowl? While it may seem natural to believe God is on the side of our team, our country, our religion, what would it mean to step back and consider that God's love and compassion could equally be spent on another team, another country, another religion?

Apparently the crowd was not ready to consider these questions, for when they heard this testimony from Jesus, they were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of town, and led him to the edge of the cliff so that they might hurl him off of it. (I guess I should feel lucky; when people don't like my sermons they just grumble, or sometimes leave).

As Christians, I hope there *are* a few truths that can unite us, truths we can boldly proclaim. The first is that God loves you. And not just you, but the person sitting next to you, and me, and the stranger we don't know, whether living in Leonia or Lebanon, Bogota, NJ or Bogotá, Colombia; Teaneck or Tokyo. God's love is even for the person who has been taking up space in our mind as the enemy. And maybe you did not do anything to earn that love, but it is there anyway, ready for you when you are ready to receive it.

God's love leads to a second truth: God desires and even demands justice for those God loves. This is where sometimes it feels like God's love is in competition: if God's demand for justice requires that I give up some of my privilege, does that mean God is loving me less? No, in fact, God's demand for our moral goodness is actually a very loving expectation. Letting go of the things that privilege us at someone else's expense can even spark joy, *if* we are in spiritual connection with God and neighbor more than with our greed.

The third is that God calls us, touches our lips, to tell the truth of God's love and justice. God *chose* Jeremiah. Don't think that God couldn't have reached the people another way: a loud, booming voice, or an angel to be God's messenger. But there was something particular about Jeremiah, just a boy, that God needed to get God's message across. God also calls each of us, in our own particular bodies and voices, to tell God's truth. No one can speak it quite like you can. Sometimes telling the truth may in fact lead you to the edge of the cliff. Like Jesus, may you be blessed to not absorb the fear and rage that others throw at you but to pass right through it.