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“Telling the Truth”

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Psalm 51:1-12; Ephesians 4:1-16; 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

A pastor was having a discussion with his teen-aged son about the importance of telling the truth. He had probably said more than he knew, but he was still holding forth. Finally, the son said in response, “Well, Dad, you know everybody tells lies.” And the father replied, “No, I’m not sure everybody tells lies, but if everybody tells lies, that doesn’t make it right.” The son answered, “I know, but everybody does it. We admit that in church. Before the prayer of confession, we say that everybody lies.” The father saw that he was getting nowhere and became a little frustrated, so he decided to let it go. The next Sunday when they were in church, the person doing the “Call to Confession” used a call that we often use which says, “If we say we have no sin, we are strangers to the truth and self-deceived.” And the young boy looked at his father in the pulpit as if to say, “See? ‘We’re all strangers to the truth and self-deceived.’ We say it right here in church.”

Telling the truth is not easy. I saw a cartoon in the *New Yorker* several years ago. It had shown an aging man standing before a mirror. He said to the mirror, “Mirror, mirror on the wall—LIE to me!” It is often painful—this business of telling the truth.

A case in point is David and Nathan. David had arranged for the death of Uriah the Hittite so he could marry Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba, who was carrying his child. A son was born, and things were going well. People of power often think that they are above conventional morality. Have you noticed? You may have heard that there is a group in Washington called “The Family.” Prominent politicians are members of that group. One member is the governor of South Carolina, Mark

Sanford. When he quoted David in his press conference about his trip to Argentina, people were amused that he would choose David. It is “The Family” that takes David as an example because they believe if you are in office because, as the Bible says, people in power have been placed there by God, then you have the right to do whatever you need to do to get your job done. It’s a scary thing—that anything people in power decide to do is all right because they must be doing right, because they’re anointed by God. But it’s clear that everything we do, no matter how powerful we are, is not all right in the eyes of God. The Bible says the thing that David had done had displeased the Lord.

There was a knock on the palace door. “King David, Nathan the prophet is here to see you.” “Show him in.” Notice what Nathan does. Nathan does not come barreling in, pointing his finger and shouting, “You horrible man! Look what you’ve done! You’ve defied God!” There’s no fire and brimstone here. Nathan comes in, and he tells David a story. Stories are disarming because in stories, we begin to identify with the characters. He tells the story about two men, one rich and one poor. The poor man had only one lamb, which was like a child to him. And the rich man takes it from him to prepare a meal for a guest.

David was outraged at this gross injustice. “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold...” Nathan said to David, “You are the man!” It is difficult to speak the truth to power, but Nathan did it because the Lord told him to do it. And David did not argue with him. David did not have a rebuttal. The text says that David’s heart was split in two, and he said, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

I had read a piece by Frank Rich in a recent Sunday *New York Times* about Walter Cronkite, the newscaster who died recently. Rich wrote:

Moving as it may be to repeatedly watch Cronkite’s famous on-camera reactions to JFK’s death and the astronauts’ moon landing, those replays aren’t the story. It’s a given that an anchor might mist up during a national tragedy and cheer a national triumph. The real test is how a journalist responds when people in high places are doing low deeds out of camera view and getting away with it. Vietnam and Watergate, not Kennedy and

Neil Armstrong, are what made Cronkite Cronkite. (Rich, Frank. “And That’s Not the Way It Is.” *New York Times*, July 26, 2009, p. WK10)

He spoke the truth to us. He spoke the truth to power, and he also did not seek to entertain us, but rather to tell us the truth: that’s the way it is.

God calls us to speak the truth to power, when people begin to take advantage of others. We don’t hear much in our public conversation about the poor. It’s as if they don’t exist, but they do exist: twenty percent in this county live in poverty. And our lives are strengthened and enriched by those who dare to tell us the truth about poverty and war—things that we’d rather forget. Speaking the truth, according to the writer of the letters to the Ephesians, is a core value of the Christian community. It is at the heart of who we are. It is central in practicing our faith, and it requires a level of maturity.

There is no easy way to learn how to tell the truth. From my point of view, this instruction to speak the truth in love is one of the most difficult in scripture. I think Nathan demonstrated that he was not there simply to condemn David. He was there to bring him back, to restore him. Truth-telling is not simply “to get” the other person. It is to be part of a transforming, reconciling process. The truth can be difficult to speak and to hear, particularly among those you know well.

There is also the problem of whose truth are you speaking. There is an arrogance of those who think they possess the truth about faith, about politics, about social issues. The malady of certitude that we have the sole possession of truth, and it’s ours to dispense to whomever we want to, is not a problem confined to conservatives, liberals, or moderates. It infects us all, and it is a deadly virus in this world we live in with so many different perspectives and points of views.

So in this community, we must learn to speak the truth in love, which means in humility, with the awareness that others have truth to share. This teaches us how, not only to speak the truth, but to also listen to others’ truths. Honest conversation among people of faith who disagree, sometimes profoundly with each other, is crucial, in my opinion, if we are going to survive and thrive as a Christian

community. It is essential for those who bear witness to the reconciling love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ.

How can we witness to a world that, when God came to us in Jesus Christ, we received a gift that has the power to transform and to reconcile the world if we cannot learn to get along with people who are different from us? I know such behavior as speaking the truth in love is heavy-lifting, particularly among those of us who have grown accustomed to protecting our own truth, or to living with lies. Every once in a while it happens, and I think it happened in our country this week.

You've heard about the "Beer Summit" at the White House on Thursday. Professor Henry Gates and Sergeant Jim Crowley sat down with President Obama and Vice-President Biden to share beer and some peanuts and to talk. They must have spoken the truth to each other. Despite all the cameras, despite all the hoopla, I don't think this one brief meeting is going to solve all the racial problems in our country. But if you listen to their statements after this conversation was over, Professor Gates expressed an appreciation about what it means to provide safety for the public in a contentious culture and about what it means to protect others by putting yourself in harm's way. And Jim Crowley showed a deeper respect for living in a society where you are often considered a suspect simply because of your color. No, all of our problems of racial profiling and anger over the past were not all solved in one afternoon. However, when you speak the truth in love, God has a way of taking that conversation and transforming it, and transforming you.

Look at David. "I have sinned against God," he confesses, and the words of Psalm 51 contain his heartfelt confession. Jesus said, "To know the truth is to be set free." It's not easy. We are taught not to lie, but we're also told to be polite and to be nice. Often, we neglect the truth in favor of harmony and niceness. However, the truth happens, doesn't it? It happens among us.

Frederick Buechner, that great novelist and Presbyterian pastor, has written a book called *Telling Secrets: a memoir*. He talks about all the secrets that we keep from each other about our lives and about what's going on. He reminds us of a crowd who practices telling the truth. They gather in church basements and fellowship

halls. Many of them are recovering addicts who introduce themselves honestly by owning their conditions.

They are sitting in the basement of a church...Fluorescent lights buzz overhead. There is an urn of coffee. There is a basket which is passed around at some point which everybody who can afford to puts a dollar in to help pay for the coffee and the rent of the room. In one sense they are strangers who know each other only by their first names and almost nothing else about each other. In another sense, they are best friends, who little by little, come to know each other from the inside out instead of the other way round, which is the way we usually do it...

They could hardly be a more ill-assorted lot. Some are educated, and some never finished grade school. Some are on welfare, and some of them have hit the jackpot. Some are straight, and some are gay. There are senior citizens among them and also twenty-year-olds. Some groups are composed of alcoholics and some, like the ones I found my way to, of people who have no alcoholic problems themselves but come from families who did. The one thing they have in common can be easily stated. It is just that they all believe that they cannot live fully human lives without each other and without what they call their Higher Power...What they all do believe in, or are searching for, is a power higher than their own, which will make them well.

(Buechner, Frederick. *Telling Secrets: a memoir*. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992, pp 89–91.)

“You should know the truth,” Jesus says. “And the truth will make you free.” Free to speak the truth to each other, to grow, to be healed, and to be transformed.

If the truth be known, isn't that what happens to us every time we come to this table? I had a friend who told me that his life had been turned upside down. He was getting a lot of advice from different people, and he was having a hard time deciding what to believe. He said, “One day, I came to church. I came to the Communion table. When the pastor, who was presiding and who was a friend, took the bread and put it in my hand and said, ‘The Body of Christ, broken for you,’ and then he said, ‘The Cup of Salvation, shed for you,’ it was as if, deep down inside, I

knew a truth about myself that was more important than anything else.” If the truth be known, this is the most important truth: that there is a God who loves us, and who loves this world so much that, despite our lives, our deceit, and our distortions, God is not going to give up on us. That’s the truth. Hear it, believe it, and practice it. Amen.