

The work of Truth

Menno Mennonite Church

October 25, 2020

Purpose: To proclaim the difficult nature of God's truth that lies deeply within us

Message: As people of God, we are invited into the reconciliation of sitting with the deep truths of the world, holding them before a loving God.

Scripture: **John 8:31-38;** Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Synopsis: We always see the truth as an absolute good. Yet we do a great deal to avoid it. Each of us on some level hold onto truths about us that we would rather not share, that we would rather not have understood about us. This is true about us. It is true about society in general. We would much rather avoid the difficult truths about the painful histories that we each have lived as peoples and places and the experiences that they involve.

Yet we are invited into the truth all the same. Even when it seems far too big for us, and that it might crush us in its enormity, Jesus invites us to know the truth—all of it—and to be set free within it. Because only by embracing the difficult full truth of all of our stories can we be set free to live in grace, hope and love beyond them.

John 8:31-38

31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him,

“If you continue in my word,
you are truly my disciples;

32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

33 They answered him,

“We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone.
What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?”

34 Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you,
everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

35 The slave does not have a permanent place in the household;
the son has a place there forever.

36 So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

37 I know that you are descendants of Abraham;
yet you look for an opportunity to kill me,
because there is no place in you for my word.

38 I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence;

as for you,
you should do what you have heard from YHWH.”

I am guessing that were I to give us a minute's silence to consider that which only those who are closest that it would not only be a very quiet minute, but a bit of a shifty, uncomfortable one at that. I guessing you don't need the minute. Even my mention of the notion might have brought something to mind; a somewhat guilty pleasure, the incidents of our lives we would just as soon not speak about. Not to worry—It is not my purpose to drag these out of you. That's not what today is about. But I start here because it is a fundamental element of the human character: we value truth and honest dealing, even if there are some things that we keep well behind our filters, and rightly so. It is part of who and what we are—we construct the reality that suits us, and sometimes that construction shades the truth. We do this individually and together as families, churches, societies, nations. Some things are best left un said, the logic goes. Often it is those who are speaking a truth about a situation or someone who is outside the norm that we prefer that can be the hardest to hear. Even the universal truths that are part of us like we are all—every one of us sinners—is something we prefer to soften and avoid. In the midst of this, we keep coming back to the truth being that which sets us free. As right as this may be, that doesn't mean that freedom comes easily or all that welcome when we come down to it.

Because at the end of it all the truth and nothing but the truth including that which we really think and feel about people or things or friends is not precisely what we want. Think of the deep well of comedy that is mined with the character that is just TOO truthful, who can't or won't lie no matter what. There is no quicker way to portray a fish out of water then to place in theme the unvarnished reality of a situation. We work hard to shade ourselves from that truth especially when that truth is hard to bear. *[Lavolie]* I arrived in Canada at the tail end of their truth and reconciliation process surrounding indigenous settler relations and the long and deeply troubled history shared between them. Within this, there is some of the most emotionally and culturally raw sharing that you can conceive of as generations told their truth of what it was like to be a minority in a treaty country. Emily attended some of the hearings in Saskatchewan. They were impossibly hard days, leaving you emotionally wrung dry and not quite sure where to go. And this was just being an observer. The process spoke the truth and it was hard to hear, even as a stranger in a strange land. Truth is at the same time the greatest threat we can face and our greatest need just to begin something new.

I think that is what Jesus is getting at in this interchange. The truth—the deep truth—as dangerous as it is, also happens to be that which sets us free. This debate is part of a running interaction between him and the Pharisees in John that ends up in them trying to stone him and him “Hiding himself and leaving the temple”. This part of this dialog concerns the notion of the truth of what Jesus is saying and the pharisee’s ability to hear it. What it sounds like to me is that the pharisees don’t like what Jesus has to say one bit because it changes way too much their objective truth that they valued—that they had status laid out for them—with the reality of the matter which is that through Jesus the world has changed. Not liking what they are hearing, they do what we do best and change the story, calling on Abraham and their lineage to save them (though oddly choosing not to recall the major arc of their story involves enslavement—another truth that it sounds like it is better forgotten). But Jesus is insistent. If you want to be like Abraham, he says, you need to take a look at who and what you are, even where you least want to look and to be changed by that truth into something new. Your genetics? Your way? Your parentage? None of that matters when compared with the truth that comes and blows up the world in which you live. Does truth hurt? Sometimes it does. But, often the greatest thing that holds us in the darkness of the worlds that we construct for ourselves so very carefully is the very thought that “if they actually knew...” then they would understand that the goodness I present is not what I think that it should be.

We fear truth because the truth crushes us. It reveals us as we are. But it also allows us to live beyond our truth, we find new life and have it fully. One time, I got in trouble in School. I had taken the wire out of a spiral notebook from the trash after the teacher had explicitly told me not to. Waving it around on the playground, I managed to catch one of my friends in the eye with the wire such that he had to get some medical attention for the wound. And I was found out. I was sent to see the principal—a first for me, goody two shoes that I was. As it happened it was Friday and the Principal was not able to cope with me that day, so I was instructed to return on the Monday. The most exquisite part of that whole incident was my spending the weekend imagining the wrath of the principal for the whole of the weekend, confident that I was going to get the paddle or worse once they knew what I had done. I came up with elaborate plans for explaining it all away, bargaining for reprieve—the whole 5 stages of grief at work here. Naturally, when Monday came, and it was time to face the music, it was nothing like my imagination at all. There was stern talk, and several days of detention, but that

was basically it. Once the truth was told, I was freed from the bondage of needing to maintain the secret of what I had done, and the imagined potential it holds. Truth is like that—it scares us, we resist it, we try to hide it. Jesus is saying that the Truth of all of God’s love can be crushing in the moment, but it also invites us to new life on the other side as well.

I think we miss this because we are so often convicted that the truth of a matter can only ever be an objective matter. There is one way it happened, one set of facts and everyone’s understanding of the facts will merit a just decision if we just spend enough time whittling down to the bedrock principle of the thing. But what I think that misses is that it confuses the factual truth of what did or did not happen with the interpreted impact of those happenings through the individual lens of those who experience the situation to make sense of it all. I will call this for ease of use the subjective truth. Our systems so bias the object truth—the “just the facts mam” sense of reality that there is very little room for the subjective impactful truth along the way. We value the objective reality of the matter of the facts, and disregard as irrelevant or worse yet downright wrong the experiential meaning that arises from those who have lived those happenings. That is one of the powers that makes restorative justice so incredible effective—it moves beyond the factual objective basis of who did what to whom and into the subjective reality of hearing the truth of the impact it had on real people in real situations. It connects people back into the messy bits of life that we would rather ignore for the relatively simple issue of reasonable retribution and doesn’t address the reality of those facts and the impacts that they have. It dehumanizes the situation to such a point that we might establish the facts of the matter, but we will never heal the rift that those facts create.

Which is fine analysis, but what, I am guessing you are wondering by now might I be on about? I think there is a lot to be said to understanding both the power of hearing other voices and why hearing other people’s subjective truths makes lives so hard. We tend to forget that history teaches us time and again that each time people get better at communicating the world gets turned on it head for a while. It happened 500 years ago in the religious reformation growing out of printing, in the media age of the 60’s and now in the digital age where anyone can speak their mind. What I think we are being invited to, especially within Jesus is a new way of hearing each other and listening for the truth within. As opposed to listening in the sense of ONLY objective truth we are invited to listen more fully to the harder truths within. To be clear,

I do think there is such a thing as objective truth; it just gets so layered and complicated in how we live reality that it is very hard to separate from subjective truths. I think this is what Jesus is getting at when he invites the leaders past what they KNOW to be true about Abraham and all the rest an into what is fully true; the dynamic relationship of YHWH, Son and Spirit at play within the kingdom of God. We are invited to embrace the truth—not just that which we can recite, but hearing the truth from other people as their truth and their hurt as a way of working time and again at reconciling the pains of this world into the way of the Kingdom. It means hearing stories, hard stories of hurt and injury and pain, and sitting with them and hearing from a perspective that is not our own (another dangerous piece of real truth being that it is both objective (something happened x y z) and subjective (and this is what is meant to me and the people I care about)) at the very same time. It means honoring not just the what of the matter but the because as well, and in honoring that bringing the holy along with us.

This is deeply challenging. It is hard to hear the full truth of our nearest relationships, let alone to take on the deeper and wider perceptive differences that exist in our broader lives. But, to quote my era of popular culture, the Truth is out there; it is just a good deal more messy that we are used to it being. In in hearing—really hearing we can extend the love of Christ and freedom of being loved time and again. Because more often than not being heard and known is at least as powerful as being loved.

When we receive truth and know the hand of God within it, we are given this assurance: that God will meet us within the truth. For when truth, full truth, deep truth, messy truth is shared and known, it will set us free. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. May we seek that truth with each other now and always.