

Truth, Courage, & Love

Sometimes, there is a price to be paid for telling the truth. Sometimes, people don't want to be reminded of what is right and what is wrong. Sometimes, our courage isn't appreciated. Sometimes, those we attempt to love don't love us in return. Nevertheless, I often stand in this place at this hour and encourage you to go out and speak uncomfortable truths. I tell you to have the courage of your convictions when they are based in our mutual understanding of God's word to us in the Scriptures or in the stirrings of your conscience toward love. I imagine you sometimes get tired of hearing it. Sometimes I get tired of saying it. But if we are serious about the vision of the Beloved Community that I believe we share when we sing songs like "We Shall Overcome," then we need to be prepared to speak the truth with courage and love.

So today I am taking full advantage of some well-known passages in both Testaments which happen to be the readings today in the Revised Common Lectionary. I believe these passages speak to us today about truth and courage and love. Nothing that I say will be ground-breaking, I suspect. I've got some new stories to tell, some illustrations I haven't used before. But the core message is one you know: God loves us and forgives us and so in return we are called to love and forgive our sisters and brothers and to call others to do the same. Truth, courage, and love.

I've found myself this week thinking and speaking and acting on these three virtues in relationship to the issue of homelessness. It is one of the points of continued amazement in my life that I have ended up being regarded, rather undeservedly, I think, as one of Lynnwood's foremost advocates for the homeless. Until I became your pastor almost eleven years ago, homelessness wasn't an issue I thought much about. In some ways, that's rather odd – I had a couple of episodes of couch-surfing in my life: once when I was 20 and was invited to leave our family home by my stepmother and again about a year later when I was temporarily ejected from my university campus housing on account of some bad behavior. Connie and I have also taken in my sister a couple of times when incidents in her life had left her without stable housing. But the fact of the matter is that my status as a healthy, white, well-educated man raised in privilege had always protected me from the spectre of prolonged inconvenience.

I didn't really even consider homelessness deeply when I was working in social service where I ran an organization that helped needy people daily, nor when I first came here to help manage the Shepherd's Garden project. But then, one night during one of the neighborhood meetings we had to introduce the project, I made an off-hand remark about how clearing out the west side of our property would remove shelter for animals both four-legged and two-legged, meaning, cruelly, the transients who used our blackberry brambles as shelter. Cindy Proctor from Beacon Development heard me and after the meeting she confronted me, kindly but firmly. I realized then that I had been wrong not to know more about what those men and women were facing and not to care about their plight. I resolved to change my heart and my mind and began to spend more time talking to the homeless folks who came to the church for help, forged relationships of true friendship with some, rejoiced with some of them when they were able to improve their lives and mourned when I was called on to memorialize others who died as a result of the desperate choices they made.

And so, this week, in conversation with some friends when the topic of homelessness came up, I was in a very different position than when I'd cracked wise at that neighborhood meeting. I felt called to speak to them about the truth I'd learned. I was able to summon the courage to do so

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and I'm praying that I also evidenced the love with them to which we are all called. Before I finish those stories, let me turn to the Scriptures and share with you the templates I hope to follow in my actions.

I hope you recognized our reading from Luke this morning of the second half of a story in which we usually focus more on the first half. This is Luke's telling of the Sabbath early in the ministry of Jesus when he went to the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth and delivered what some have called his mission statement. Reading from a scroll of the Book of Isaiah, he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." We usually remember those words and what he said next, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," which is appropriate because this passage is the very heart of the Good News. But we often forget, or rather neglect to remember or review, what the reaction of Jesus' hometown audience was. At first they spoke well of him but they were "amazed" by his words and their reaction soon turned to rage so great that they attempted to throw him off a cliff and stone him. From our vantage point of 21st Century Lynnwood after two millennia of Christianity, we are left confused. What on earth happened to make Jesus' neighbors turn on him so violently? What did he say?

It's not just about what Jesus said. It's also about what he didn't say. Let's think for a moment about the situation that morning in the synagogue. Jesus is speaking in Nazareth, a town in Galilee. At that time, Galilee was probably best known for being a hotbed of revolutionary fervor. The observant Jewish residents hated the fact that so many foreigners had been moved in by centuries of conquerors that their district was now known by many as "Galilee of the Gentiles." Small revolts against the Romans had risen and been put down again and again. The punishment for anyone even suspected of being a revolutionary was death by crucifixion and the Romans were not shy about applying it. The folks in that Nazareth synagogue had been suffering with the tension of living under a harsh and hostile regime for generations. They longed for God's intervention to redress the wrongs done to them. They longed for the Messiah to deliver them. So when Jesus began to quote the prophecy of Isaiah, they would have been right with him. "Yes, Jesus, preach it, boy! We need the good news, we need release from oppression!" But Jesus didn't give it to them quite the way they expected.

You see, Jesus didn't quote the whole passage from Isaiah. Here's Isaiah 61:1-2 in its entirety: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn..." In the deep anger of the Galileans over all their years of oppression, the idea of God's vengeance on their oppressors was just as important to them as was their own freedom. They were absolutely certain that when the good times came for them, it would mean bad times for their enemies. After all, it was in the Scripture! And those Romans deserved it! When Jesus spoke, he spoke "gracious words" indeed – his word of grace made no allowance for vengeance. Of course it amazed them – they couldn't imagine one without the other. They were certain it had to happen that way.

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What he said next would have further flown in the face of their certainty about what God had in store for them. Perhaps they'd already begun to ask Jesus when he was going to start performing healing miracles in their town or perhaps he only knew that they would. But not only does he tell them, in essence, to forget it, that he's not going to play by their rules but he further offends their sensibilities by reminding them of two stories of some of Israel's greatest prophets. Not only does he refuse to talk about God's vengeance on the Gentiles they hate, he reminds them that their own God in the past has actually blessed Gentiles over God's own people. When all of Israel was suffering a famine because of drought, God sent Elijah to miraculously feed not a poor Jewish widow but a Gentile, the widow of Zarephath in Sidon. And Elisha, Elijah's successor, never cured a Jewish leper by the power of God but he did cure Naaman, general of the Syrian army and archenemy of Israel.

Even though Jesus was quoting from what must have been one of their favorite Scriptures, even though he was simply telling them stories of God's mercy that they must have known since their childhoods, they couldn't hear what he was saying to them. His interpretation was too radical; they were too sure they knew already what God was about. Confronted with gracious words that contradicted their iron-clad assumptions, they grew angry, murderously so. To come into the Nazareth synagogue and preach a God whose love for their enemies they could not recognize was blasphemy and the penalty for blasphemy was death. There was no Roman garrison in the obscure little town of Nazareth to stay their hands as there was in Jerusalem, so they led Jesus off to put him to death in the traditional way. The great Tennessee preacher and professor Fred Craddock writes of those villagers, "anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth embedded in their own tradition."

I don't really think it was by supernatural means that Jesus escaped that day. I don't think it took any Jedi mind tricks ("This is not the blasphemer you are looking for"). I think Jesus let his former neighbors get him to that hilltop and then turned around and looked each of them in the eye. And, one by one, they were unable to meet his gaze and backed off and let him go his way.

The courage which Jesus shows in telling the truth in this incident and to which I am urging you is something that must be encouraged in most of us. The Old Testament pericope for this morning tells the story of how one of God's great prophets had to learn to screw his courage to the sticking place. This is from the book of Jeremiah, in the story of his calling: "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'" Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "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, says the Lord." Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "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.""

I am encouraged by this story and I hope you are, too. It's a reminder to us that carrying God's truth to a world that doesn't always want to hear it can be scary. But it also reminds us that God is with us in those situations. We can't just beg off because we are afraid. Here's one of those stories from this week: In a conversation with friends, the talk turned to the new emphasis in the

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press and local government on homelessness. We were discussing the mayor of Seattle's plan to provide safe parking lots for those who are living in their cars and one friend reminded us that she lives very close to one of the proposed sites. Referring to the community meeting that was to happen this week, she said, "I'd go and advocate for the homeless people but I'm afraid of the reaction of my neighbors. I could get my tires slashed or something."

I confess that I was deeply offended by this. My friend is a Christian and a leader in her faith community. She often speaks in stern judgment of the way in which our society fails to live up to the ideals it claims. Her neighborhood is not one that I'd associate with danger toward those who speak out or are different in other ways. But she was willing to let some very dubious fears prevent her from doing what she knew was right. But even if her fears had been well-grounded was she free to not speak the truth? She and her family are relatively affluent; a tow and a new set of tires would not much discommode them. And I confess I spoke without much love when I said, as she looked at me after saying this, "If you are looking to me for permission to remain silent, you are looking to the wrong guy."

And that is where I was in the wrong. She was struggling and I offered her no words of love and encouragement, only judgment. In my outrage, I forgot the truth of what Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth. Love "does not insist on its own way... For we know only in part... now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." I was rather forcefully reminded of this at another gathering this week. I'd been encouraging the group to observe the sorts of mutual respect guidelines we use in Evergreen Association when another member of the group spoke up: "I think we need not just to respect one another but to love one another," he said. And with that reminder so fresh, when another member of our group took a very negative approach to a discussion about the homeless, an approach I might have taken eleven years ago, I controlled my righteous indignation and did my best to use a soft tone. I hope that friend heard the truth in my heart more effectively than did my other friend at the beginning of the week.

My sisters and my brothers, we are indeed called to speak the truth to our society so that, together, we may overcome, live in peace, walk hand in hand. We are called to speak out in courage, never fearing what humans may say or do but instead seeking the approval of God whose Beloved Community we seek to advance. But let us never forget, either, that love never ends. So let us resolve to live our lives in love, with patience and kindness and forgiveness, courageous in the truth but committed to love. For our God is love. "Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now we know only in part; then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."