

“How Do You Know What’s the Truth?”
Reformation Sunday + (Pr 25) Pentecost 20 –10.27.2019 –Lk 18:9-14; Jn 8:31-36

“You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” How do you know what is true and what is not? Most of us have sat in the pews of churches for a good part of our lives seeking answers to the challenging questions; wondering what is happening around us or to us; looking for love in all the wrong places. But there is something about worship – something about gathering in a welcoming place to hear the Word and share in the Supper – that we recognize as true.

Truth is subjective – even situational. My truth at 40 was not necessarily the same as my truth at 12. Your truth today might not be the same as the truth that the person right next to you claims, sometimes vigorously! Truth – when taken out of its box and examined carefully – is not easily defined. Truth is rarely explained fully by knowledge of our heads; unless validated by experience of our hearts, too.

Thus, one of the foundations of Christian worship is our relationship with God, and God’s with us. It is this initial connection that we have with our Creator that sets us on our own faith journey – a journey often begun in the waters of baptism. And while we might agree that God is Truth – yet we may never have personally *experienced* the Truth that Jesus promises will make us “free.”

If today were not the day we set aside to mark Reformation Sunday – we might not be talking about knowing the truth (that makes us free...) If today were simply the 20th Sunday after the Day of Pentecost, we would be hearing a story about two men – two believers - how they experienced their lives, and how they expressed their truth. Let’s visit them for a moment, from Luke 18:9-14.

Jesus also told this parable to some who *trusted in themselves* and regarded others with contempt:

“Two men went up to the temple to pray,
one, a Pharisee, and the other, a tax collector.

The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus,
‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people:
thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.
I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

But the tax collector, standing far off,
would not even look up to heaven,
but was beating his breast and saying,
‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

I tell you, this man went down to his home justified
rather than the other;
for all who exalt themselves will be humbled,
but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

One of the truths we know very well in America is that everyone is an individual. Rarely do we speak of our lives in connection with another – as if others had no affect whatsoever on us. Today, as we confirm ten of our high schoolers, it strikes me that they have a much healthier perspective on living in community. They know the ups and downs of group dynamics. They

know the scrutiny of someone who thinks they are better, and others who have yet to grasp their own self-confidence. They are just recently out of the middle school cauldron and have felt the effects of bullies, admirers, and soul-mate relationships that just might end at any moment. It is easy to see why all of us try to escape the crowds into smaller and smaller circles of trust – which sometimes become the beginning of our independent lives; sometimes end up as isolating, lonely and disappointing.

Two men went up to the Temple to pray... one, a career interpreter of Holy Law who was pretty impressed with himself. Having spent his whole life in the pursuit of what the Scripture means, he could take comfort in the fact, that, since he spent so much time with God's word, he had spent as much with God. I confess to you, my friends, that this is the state of many pastors, including myself. We are called to religious life and often find that much easier than the call to follow Jesus. Just look at our posture – arms wide open, heads lifted, with the sweet smile of the Pharisee, content he was one of God's chosen – and needing nothing else.

The second, a tax collector, was hated and feared by everyone. He was the original "I am from the IRS and I'm here to help you" guy. He had thrown in with Rome, the occupying force and took advantage of his neighbors, friends and family with every transaction. But he knew the Truth about himself. For whatever reason, his heart had felt the conviction of his sin, and he had only one way to be freed from his state of entrapment. He prayed. But he prayed as if he knew to whom he prayed. He prayed, knowing his place. He prayed because he needed it. He prayed with his whole body bowed to the source of his existence.

All of us came here today with only a handful of things we share in common Whether we acknowledge our humanity as common or not, we start there. And in this room, that humanity has as its Source – God the Creator, Jesus the Redeemer and our Companion, the Holy Spirit. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu regularly used the African word "ubuntu" which was chosen as the theme for the ELCA National Youth Gathering some years ago in St. Louis. *Ubuntu* claims that *I am because we are*, holding that a person becomes a person only through other persons. Bishop Tutu added that we cannot be a Christian alone. (We need God...) Nor can we be a human being alone. We need each other.

Christian life is not about us. Little in the Bible is about us and how we should be. It's mostly all about God and how love should be. The Reformation was all about Martin Luther's struggle to find God's love. Our struggle is to "continue in God's word," which means we are literally abiding/dwelling/*living* in the midst of God.

So how do you know what Truth is? Well, what do you know through the knowledge of your head AND the experience of your heart?

What makes you catch your breath because it is so beautiful?

What brings you to your knees in sorrow for, as evil affects the world?

What do you trust as good and fair?

Where do you see mercy and compassion?

When is kindness more powerful than selfishness?

What would you lose your life for; and who would lose their life for you?

The truth that makes you free? If you go deep inside yourself, you will hear God speaking it through the prophet Jeremiah, "*I will be your God and you will be my people.*" It's written on your heart. You are not alone. You are never alone. And that's the truth. Amen.

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