

Sermon – Refreshing Honesty
Sunday, September 22, 2019
Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1, I Timothy 2:1-7
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Our first scripture is Jeremiah chapter 8, verse 18 through chapter 9, verse 1. Our readings from the ancient prophet Jeremiah, who served Israel and Judah during the sixth century BCE prior to the Babylonian Exile, began four weeks ago with Jeremiah's call as a young boy. Two weeks ago we explored Jeremiah's metaphor of God as the potter with the will and desire to shape the Israelites lives. Today we read a communal lament. The people's unwillingness to listen to the truth about the need to change their ways leads to Israel's demise. The prophet represents the people who mourn. In these powerful words, we also hear the voice of God who mourns for the people, whom God formed from the earth, and their inability to be shaped by the truth. Hear the word of God.

My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.

¹⁹ Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land:

"Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?"

("Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?")

²⁰ "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.

²¹ For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

²² Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?

Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?

***9** ^a O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people! Amen.*

Our second scripture is first Timothy, chapter 2, verses 1-7. Although traditionally attributed to the Apostle Paul, the letters to Timothy date from a later time than the life of Paul. As the decades passed after Jesus' resurrection, the Christian communities realized Jesus' return was not eminent and found new ways to organize their lives for worship and service. The author of Timothy teaches about prayer, reminding Christians to pray for all people, even the kings and leaders who persecute them. Thus, we learn that concern for others and self-interest need not involve contradiction and compromise. We also learn that God's salvation and truth is intended for all people, something unheard of before the gospel of Christ. Listen to what the Spirit is saying.

1 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. 3 This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, 6 who gave himself a ransom for all —this was attested at the right time. 7 For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Refreshing Honesty

Text: For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

1 Timothy 2:7

Let us pray. Loving God, thank you for the truth telling in our lives which allows us to see ourselves more clearly, to have a change of heart, and to refresh, to restart, to recalibrate our lives. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

“To be honest with you”...beginning a statement with this phrase has become a pet peeve in the Kieffer Household. I’m not sure when Peter and I first noticed how often people introduce a statement with this deceptively reassuring clause; however, it honestly has the opposite effect. One wonders: was everything said prior to this phrase dishonest?

Macmillann Dictionary defines the spoken phrase “to be honest” as one that is “used when telling someone what you really think, especially when it may be something they do not want to hear.” All of us have likely said “to be honest” or any of its derivatives – honestly, to tell you the truth, in all honesty, to be frank – in our everyday speech. It’s one of the most overused expressions in the English language and because it adds very little to the content that follows within the sentence it begins, we would do well to work toward deleting it from our vocabulary.

Perhaps the subliminal reason this expression has become so common is we live in a time when, as American Singer Billy Joel put it in his song of lament, “Honesty is such a lonely word... and mostly what I need from you.” Honesty is what we long for from the people we love, the people who shape and form our lives, and the people who lead our churches, schools, hospitals, communities, and country.

Our children long for us to be honest about the expectations we have for them and to tell them the truth when they do not meet those expectations. Without this kind of truth-telling and accountability within our homes and our churches, we deprive those we love the privilege to develop their character, to become resilient, and to be grounded and anchored in their faith. Without those simple, loving acts of discipline and truth-telling through the years, our children will lack a moral compass, which is essential to live life with direction, meaning, and hope.

In the same way, we cannot grow as professionals and as people unless our mentors, colleagues, and friends are honest with us about the areas that provide opportunities for growth, those blind spots that get us in trouble when we are behind the wheel. Without a willingness to be open to refresh, to restart, to recalibrate our lives, and to continue to learn and grow throughout our careers, the work we do will lack integrity.

Our community cannot care for the homeless among us without being honest about the ways we have fallen short in the past, about the subtle racism that still colors the decisions we make, and about the need to collaborate in this endeavor. We are grateful for those who serve the homeless in Springfield and for the initiative of our hospitals and medical school in addressing the complex factors related to homelessness.

Our country cannot address climate change without hearing, once again, the inconvenient truth this time spoken by those who marched in the largest youth-led demonstrations in history on Friday. The marches came three days before the gathering of the world leaders at the United Nations for a much-anticipated climate summit. Millions of people from Manhattan to Mumbai took to the streets around the globe, their chants, speeches and homemade signs delivering the same uncompromising message to world leaders: do more to combat climate change — and do it faster. From small island nations such as Kiribati to war-torn countries such as Afghanistan and across the United States, young people left their classrooms to raise their voices and speak truth to those with power — that governments act with more urgency to wean the world off fossil fuels and cut carbon dioxide emissions. “Oceans are rising and so are we,” read the sign of one 13-year-old truth-teller from London.

May our congregation have the courage to speak the truth in difficult matters continuing the tradition of our abolitionist founders. Truth-telling is at the heart of the good news we proclaim as Christians and the essence of the message from the prophet Jeremiah. Although the truth is not always easy to hear and, we, like the ancient Israelites, do not always heed the truth when it is spoken, the truth will set us free.

When we are honest with ourselves about who we are, the broken places within our lives, the prejudices and biases within our hearts, and the superficialities and graven images within our culture, there is an opportunity for forgiveness, change, redemption, and authenticity. When we seek truthfulness, there is an opportunity to refresh, to restart, and to recalibrate our lives.

The words of the prophet Jeremiah were specific in the context of the Israelite history, and yet, they are a timeless reminder of this simple truth: You and I are accountable and responsible before God for the lives we live and the homes and communities we build. We are called by God to be the planners and the architects of the lives we have been given. Our fate is not arbitrary or undeserved.

How grateful are we for the honesty of the biblical writers and for the good news of God, the Savior and Christ, the Mediator, who desire everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. May we be refreshed, this day and every day, by the balm of honesty, that heals our lives and soothes our souls. Amen.