

Sermon – The Gift of Honesty
Sunday, September 18, 2022
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 read 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. In these powerful words of Jeremiah, 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** 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 may 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: The Gift of 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. I Timothy 2:7

Let us pray. Loving God, thank you for the gift of honesty and for the truth-tellers in our lives. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

As we pay tribute to our milestone members who have been a part of this Presbyterian congregation for fifty, fifty-five, sixty, sixty-five, and seventy-two years, the truth of Queen Elizabeth's influence is brought

home in a personal way. Only one of our milestone members, the 101-year-old Margie Dobson (whom I visited at the Illinois Presbyterian Home this week), joined Westminster prior to Elizabeth's reign.

How many generations have prayed for this queen (as I Timothy exhorts us) whose coronation in 1952 was internationally broadcast in an honest gift of full disclosure and transparency, letting the world know that this petite 26-year-old woman was Queen of the United Kingdom. Those in power resisted her decision with no avail and the world watched in wonder, excitement, and amazement as she took the throne. Little did we know then how strong, resilient, loyal, wise, and kind her reign would be or all the public, painful truths she would face along the way that would form her character, strengthen her resolve, and foster necessary change.

One of the things I learned about Queen Elizabeth this week was her love for Scotland and the Church of Scotland. Since she died at home in her Balmoral Castle, some might say she died a Presbyterian. As I watched the service Monday morning at St. Giles Cathedral, I felt a strong affinity with the liturgy, scripture, hymns, and organ music. I found comfort in the dignity and the ceremony of the service and felt a deep gratitude for my role within the rich tradition of Presbyterianism. I vaguely recognized the officiating pastor, Rev. Calum MacLeod, and later remembered we had co-officiated a wedding together in 1998 at Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church during his tenure there. The choir master for Queen Elizabeth's service this week conducted our own Westminster Choir during their 2001 visit to St. Giles. (pause)

The Macmillann English Dictionary defines the 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 is considered one of the most overused expressions in the English language.

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 1978 hit 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 our willingness to be open to the truth and to continue to learn and to grow throughout our lives, the work we do will lack integrity.

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, redemption, and authenticity. When we seek truthfulness, there is an opportunity to form our character, strengthen our resolve, and foster necessary change.

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 years we have been given.

How grateful are we for those who love us enough to risk honesty, for the honesty of the biblical prophets, and for the God who joined us in our humanity and risked death on the cross so that we might know redemption and truth. Amen.