

To Tell the Truth: About Race

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Then Jesus said to the Jews who believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-32).

My friend Peter was a member of the pastor nominating committee, 21 years ago, that called me to the church I served before Westminster. He’s a tall, good-looking professor who was assistant dean at the local law school, and later went on to become dean of a couple other law schools. He had a great voice, and sang frequently in worship with two women named Mary and Polly, so of course they were known around the church as Peter, Polly, and Mary.

One day Peter and I were meeting for lunch, and he asked where I wanted to go. “How about Cracker Barrel?” I suggested, because it was nearby. “I don’t want to go to Cracker Barrel,” he said, with a hint of sternness that didn’t sound like it had much to do with what was on the menu. “Why not?” I asked. Hopefully, things have changed since then, but at that time he said, “Because that chain has not been very good to people like me.” What he meant by “people like me” was black people.

That was one of several conscious experiences I’ve had of the kind of cluelessness some people mean when they talk about “white privilege” today. Most white folk bristle when they first hear that term. We’re inclined to get defensive, and then dismissive – especially if we came, as I did, from a blue-collar background. “I’m not privileged,” we say. “Whatever I have, and whatever I’ve accomplished, it’s because I’ve worked hard. And some of us aren’t doing so well anyway. What’s all this talk about privilege?”

In our highly polarized culture, which seems to be getting more tribal all the time, people go to DEFCON 2 at the slightest provocation. They throw words back and forth like potatoes in a food fight, talking past each other, instead of really listening, and trying to understand where other folks are coming from.

My friend Peter and I didn't do that because, well, we were friends. We still are, and he stops to visit once in a while when he's passing through Pittsburgh. Friends are more interested in building up relationships than pouncing on one another's mistakes. And Christian friends know that 1 Corinthians 13 is not just a text we read at weddings because the word "love" appears so often in the English translation. We know that the Greek word is *agape*, the kind of love God has for us – a love that does not rejoice in finding fault, but rejoices in the truth, as St. Paul says.

I've been privileged in lots of ways; and truth be told, it's probably fair to say that most of us here have enjoyed a good many privileges too. Among my privileges has been the chance to become friends with people from backgrounds other than my own – different races and nationalities and social classes. It's been a privilege that so many have been so gracious, willing to teach me things I didn't know, on the assumption that cluelessness is not a moral fault unless we cling to it, or don't want to grow out of it, by way of avoiding hard truths.

The temptation to hide from the truth goes back a long way, doesn't it? It shows up in the very beginning of the Bible. Whether you take the story of Adam and Eve literally or as a deep parable of the human condition, the point is the same. God comes looking for Adam in the garden when, for the first time, Adam feels the need to hide from God. "Who

told you that you were naked?” God asks. “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” And right then and there, Adam invents evasion and tries to flee from responsibility. “The woman you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” You can hear the double accusation. “It’s her fault. She gave it to me. What could I do? And by the way, she was your idea. I just woke up from a nap one day, and there she was!”

Then things fall apart quickly, in a cascade of consequences. The man blames the woman; the woman blames the snake; and next thing you know, one of their boys is murdering the other, and copping an attitude with God. “Where is your brother Abel?” God asks, not because God doesn’t know, but because Cain needs to face the truth. But Cain wraps a lie in a mantle of cynicism, and he protests, as though he himself were some sort of victim. “I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” Now Cain, like his parents, feels that he needs to hide from the truth.

Denying the truth has become such a habit that there are people today who claim we live in a “post-truth” world – that there’s no such thing as truth; there are only opinions and points of view. But of course that’s nonsense. Nobody really lives that way. We take a thousand things for granted as true every day. If we didn’t, we could never get out of bed, or feed ourselves, or do our work, or have any kind of relationships. But people sometimes call truth itself into question, by way of avoiding some truth they’d rather not face.

It’s been said that the first casualty of war is the truth. Armies and peoples at war have a way of exaggerating their own virtues and victories, as well as their enemies’ vices and defeats. A similar dynamic plays out whenever

individuals or tribes line up on opposite sides of some issue. People trumpet their own innocence and their opponents' guilt, while their interest in truth shrinks down to fit only their other interests.

But that's a profoundly unchristian way to live. Christians who take our faith seriously must be committed to the truth, because we serve a Savior who says "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." It was Pilate, after all, who, given the choice between putting an innocent man to death or resisting a chanting crowd, chose the easier way and sacrificed the innocent. Caught in a crisis of decision, Pilate asked, as cynics always ask, "What is truth?" And then he handed the truth itself over to be crucified.

If anyone in this world should have an unwavering commitment to the truth, surely it is we who call ourselves Christians. We need to listen to the truth, even when it's hard to hear. And we need to tell the truth, even when the crowd, or the other members of our tribe, try hard not to listen.

Part of the truth for me is that, while I've worked all my life, I've also enjoyed all sorts of privileges. My parents never had much money, but they cared for me, and launched me into the world as best they could. I went to college on a scholarship from Heinz, and divinity school on loans from the church, repayable in service. I learned from people who dedicated themselves to teaching, and I was mentored by some who saw things in me that I did not see in myself.

Some of my privileges were more-or-less independent of my demographics, but some of them came by virtue of my being white, and others by virtue of being male. I never knew

discrimination in finding a job, or getting a loan, or buying a house. I never was sexually harassed, or had any reason to say firsthand, “#MeToo.” I never had to give my son “The Talk” that African Americans give their sons, because mine was never in danger of being pulled over for driving a nice car in a particular neighborhood; and even if he was pulled over, he never had to worry that he might not make it through the experience alive.

Not everyone shares these privileges, and those of us who do, need to listen – really listen – to those who do not. And we need to do all that we can to help make things right for everyone, because that’s what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We need to have a sense of urgency about making things right, too. The Amos 5:24 team on race relations prepared the worship service at Presbytery the other day, and you know Amos 5:24 says “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Do we hear that? Let justice *roll* down, not *trickle* down. God’s justice pours out like a waterfall with power to do great things, not like a timid trickle that takes forever to accomplish anything at all.

Over the years I’ve heard some Christians say that our faith is about love, not justice; that justice is an Old Testament thing, while the New Testament focuses on love. The truth is that love may sometimes be more than justice, but it can never be less.

Jesus himself never separates the two entirely. The same Christ who summed up the law by commanding us to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves also said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you

tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.” Here Jesus sounds like an Old Testament prophet. He sounds like Amos, because Amos tells the truth, while Jesus *is* the truth. And what they both mean by “justice” is treating other people fairly, the way we ourselves would want to be treated in their situation.

Nothing makes Jesus madder when he walks this earth than religious hypocrites, because they give faith, and even God, a bad name. We all know that the fastest-growing religious demographic in America is the “Nones” – those who, when asked in surveys about their religious affiliation, check the box marked “None.” If you ask why that is, it’s often because of what they see the church doing, and failing to do. Most of the Nones are moved by Jesus, and many of them deeply. They’re just not so impressed by the company Jesus keeps – by some of those who claim to be his disciples. An essential side effect of doing justice could turn out to be evangelism, since many new people might come to church if they saw the church standing more conspicuously on the side of both justice and love.

Westminster sponsors a community lecture series called Town Hall South, which will begin its fiftieth season next fall. One of the speakers a few years ago was Jane Pauley, whom many of us remember as a national television personality from a little while back. Jane was very charming, and really quite modest. She said that when she was offered a chance to be back on television after a dozen years or so away, well into her fifties, she met with someone who told her all the things he would have to fix about her face. He said, “I can fix this, and this, and this; and we have to do that now because television has turned high-definition since you’ve been gone.” Jane said, “I was starting to get

depressed about my face, but then I remembered: my demographic can't see in high definition.”

There's a parable in there somewhere. Something about learning to see more clearly, in higher definition, across demographics. We need to see the truth about ourselves, and one another, and each of our situations. We need to change what has to be changed, in society and in our own words and deeds, and do that urgently, precisely because we see the things God's love and justice would have us do.

When I was in seminary, somebody asked a homiletics professor how many points a sermon should have. He thought for a moment, and then he said, “At least one.” The point of this one is that we need to be willing to see and hear and tell the truth, even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard.

We need to hear the truth about racism, because it still runs rampant, fifty years after the death of Dr. King; and about mass incarceration, because it's so utterly devastating in the lives of individuals and whole communities. We need to take personal responsibility and public responsibility for creating and sustaining a truly just society for every human being, because every human being, without exception, is made in the image of God, and is precious in the sight of God.

We need to tell the truth because that's what love does, and we must learn to speak the truth in love.

We need to tell the truth because God requires that of us. In every age, God asks, “Whom shall I send?” And though we be men and women of unclean lips, and we live

among a people of unclean lips, as the prophet Isaiah says, our answer must always be, “Here am I; send me!”

We need to see and hear and tell the truth because of what Jesus himself has promised: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”