

## Character and Virtue: Truthfulness

Jeremiah 9:1-6

March 5, 2023

The book of Jeremiah begins with the voice of God to a child.

"Before you were born, I appointed you a prophet. Now I have put my words in your mouth. Today, I appoint you over nations and kingdoms: to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

This newly appointed, freshly consecrated prophet is sent by God to speak. The specific assignment is more than a little daunting. Jeremiah is called to speak the truth in an age of lies. He must deliver divine judgement in a context of self-righteous sufficiency. He is charged to challenge the comfort of a status quo that is unacceptable to God. As my teacher Walter Brueggemann has written, Jeremiah must "utter faithful folk into the abyss too long denied and through the abyss to newness."

Jeremiah is sometimes called the weeping prophet. This morning's scripture makes the reason clear. This young man, given the word of God to speak, takes no pleasure in describing the depravity of his people. In her novel *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson suggests that the difference between a prophet and a scribe is that prophets love the people they chastise. Jeremiah is a prophet who loves his nation enough to tell them hard truth. It is this: God is not pleased. Exile is on the horizon.

This morning our sermon series confronts us with the virtue of *truthfulness*. The term is intentionally chosen. Truthfulness stretches us beyond the avoidance of lying. Honesty may deal in facts, but truth deals in meaning.

Prophets tell the truth that possesses the power to set free. And for this gift, they are not always well-

received. Sometimes, they are a nuisance. Other times, they are destroyed—for telling the truth. No wonder Jeremiah resists the call. "Oh, Lord God, I am only a child." Truth-telling carries a heavy burden in a time when lies abound.

The concept of truth is in dispute among *us*. We live in an age of artificial intelligence, of deep fakes, of persistent mistruth, and algorithms designed to lead us down rabbit holes of disinformation and deception with dangerous consequences—putting real people at great risk. Particularly the marginalized and the misunderstood. We see it in legislative maneuvers meant to score political points by demeaning difference. *For shame*.

Like all virtues, truthfulness requires the accountability of genuine community. After all, knowing the truth is not intellectual. It is not informational. It is relational. And it can be transformational. "The truth," Jesus says, "will set you free." But first it might make you mad.

In the coffee shop where I write, there is a group of older men that gathers most every morning. They are friends who find it easy to move from the Colts coaching woes one moment to the war in Ukraine the next. A couple of weeks ago, I overheard the discussion as it turned to politics, and one man began to speak derisively about our neighbors who lack dependable housing. Eventually he used an offensive and inappropriate term, and you could sense the tension rising in the awkward silence that followed his words. Finally, another member of the group spoke. He did so gently, in a measured way, and here is what he said: "You know I love you even when we disagree, but that's just not true and you know it." Another long, tension-filled pause.

Finally, the original speaker responded, "You're right. I'm sorry. So...what did you think of the Super Bowl?" It was a small moment, and yet I've been thinking about it ever since. I've been wondering, I've been praying about how we cultivate the kind of community where the truth can be spoken in love and heard with an open heart.

Here is what I think. I think the capacity to speak and hear the truth in community is formed in us over time as trust is built among us. That the capacity is shaped by the practice of prayer and worship in community. That it is deepened by the witness of other truth-tellers.

For some time now, I've been living with a story that complicates the narrative we tell about the founding pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, the renowned preacher, the great writer, the courageous abolitionist, Henry Ward Beecher. Now, we are rightly proud of Beecher's legacy and his connection to this place. What follows is a cautionary tale for me and for all of us.

It was the Fourth of July, 1845. The congregation of Second Presbyterian Church was gathered in its original location on the Circle for Independence Day worship when they heard shouts and curses in the street outside. John Tucker, a forty-five-year-old former slave and resident of Indianapolis, had been walking by the church when a drunk man blocked his path and began to shout vile, racist insults at him. Soon, others surrounded him, and when John Tucker tried to run, the crowd beat him to death.

By the time Rev. Beecher rushed out to the streets, the mob had grown, and their anger turned toward abolitionists who defended Tucker's freedom. They roamed the streets, this angry mob, until they found Henry Depuy, the editor of the *Indiana Freeman*, a recently established anti-slavery newspaper. Beecher saw the rioters coming for Depuy and guided him to safety. But the next part of the story haunts me. After the mob dispersed, Beecher rushed to Depuy's office at the newspaper. He found the editor frantically typing a special edition that would recount the terrible violence and condemn the city's

lack of response. And here is what Beecher did. He pleaded with Depuy not to print the story, to say nothing about what had happened, to remain silent and leave it to the courts. Now, I know what Beecher was thinking. (Man, do I know what Beecher was thinking.) To print this story would risk more bloodshed, more rioting. No doubt Beecher thought he could save the city from such violence. But no matter the rationale, what Beecher attempted to do was withhold a truth that needed to be told. It was an act of moral cowardice.

Why do I tell this story? Because we will all be tempted to act as Beecher did. To remain silent in the face of injustice. To urge others to do the same. To justify our cowardice as an act of prudence and moderation. I tell this story because it is part of my story...because it is part of *our* story.

Jeremiah models another way. His vocation is difficult and trying at every turn. But there is, with the call, a promise. It comes from the voice of God ringing in the young man's ears, "Do not be afraid. I am with you!"

That's all he gets, and it's everything he needs. Confident in God's presence, the boy clears his throat and pursues his vocation speaking God's truth with courage.

We can do the same. Indeed, as people of Christian faith, we must speak the truth, even when such speech is condemned, mocked, or rejected. We must speak the truth even when such speech costs us something. Jeremiah's truth-telling was not free from genuine risk and loss. But in a much deeper sense the words of truth he spoke set him free.

The call of the prophet is to tell the truth without fear. So, let us tell the truth. The truth that God is not pleased with those who privilege personal power over protection of the vulnerable. The truth that God's judgment falls on those who withhold from some the freedom God gives to all. The truth that God will hold us accountable for how we have practiced the faith we profess, how we have offered the welcome we've been given, how we've extended the compassion we have received.

The truth that God's grace is stronger than our brokenness. God's courage stronger than our fear. God's forgiveness outpaces our sinfulness. In Jesus Christ we are free to live in the light of truth.

So let us find the courage to be a community of prophetic witness in a world drunk on lies. Let us tell the truth that overcomes the deceits of division, hatred, and fear. Let us tell the truth and be set free from the abyss of despair and the prison of denial.

Just before this morning's passage, Jeremiah stands at the gate of the Temple. He stands at the place where the sacred and the secular meet. And in that place, he speaks to the leaders of his land the word of the Lord. "Amend your ways and your doing and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words. This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord."

Friends at Second Church, this is God's sanctuary.

Be strong. Do not fear. Tell the truth.