

March 10, 2024
1 Corinthians 13:4-13
John 3:16-21

The Promise of Love is Truth

During this season of Lent, we are meditating on love. What does it mean to love God with all our heart, mind and strength? How are we doing at loving our neighbors as ourselves? Can we do better and be better at loving one another as Jesus loved us?

Over the past three weeks, we have talked about the promise of God's love. That love means safety. After Noah escaped the flood with an ark full of animals, God promised to keep us safe and never destroy the earth again. God has also promised that love is personal just as it was for Abraham and Sarah, whose particular lives needed God's particular blessing of a land and a family. God also promises that love creates boundaries. God's Ten Commandments teach us respect for each other. And now today, God promises that love always looks for truth. Jesus teaches the Pharisee Nicodemus that love seeks truth. It lives in the light. It does not believe lies or embrace darkness. Love stands for what is true, even if it costs love everything.

In the gospel of John, Jesus comes into the world to tell the truth. He is the Word of God. He is the embodiment of light and life. He knows what the world is about, but the world does not know what he is about. The world does not recognize him for who he is. It is blind to him and it doesn't understand him. Some people are in the dark because they can't see, through no fault of their own. Others don't want to see. They refuse to see. They don't want truth. In today's reading, Nicodemus, a religious expert, comes to Jesus because he wants to see. He wants to know and understand Jesus and his message. But he is still in the dark. Jesus says that SEEING the truth is a gift from God. It's like being born again from above. And you can tell that Nicodemus is really trying. But Jesus is talking way up here and Nicodemus is listening somewhere down here. This truth from Jesus is hard for him to grasp.

Sometimes, I feel like Nicodemus. I feel like the truth is hard to grasp. It's hard to tell what is real and what is a distortion. And what is just a PART of the truth but not the whole thing. Because sometimes multiple things can be true. The truth is more complicated now than ever. The truth about the war in Ukraine. And the violence in Israel and Palestine.

About pregnancy and women's bodies. And immigration. And climate change. And systemic racism. And homelessness. And we know that nothing is black or white. Nothing is simple. The truth about it all is not simple. And God is certainly not simple. Jesus says that it is a gift of God's grace if we have the eyes to see at all.

But that doesn't mean we should stop trying. The truth is an important part of Jesus' message. Truth is critical. And in John's gospel, there are people who should know the truth but don't. There are people who should be on truth's side, but aren't. Scribes. Pharisees. Sadducees.

Religious experts. As the gospel builds to a crescendo, we see more and more people abandoning the truth. People are afraid. They are trying to survive. The High Priest Caiaphus. King Herod. The Roman governor Pilate. It is Pilate who asks Jesus the fateful question at his trial, What is truth? The truth is standing in Pilate's courtroom, dressed in a purple robe and a crown of thorns, beaten and bruised. But Pilate can't see it. He won't see it. Because the truth is Jesus and his love. And his love is the truth.

Too often, though, truth is simply certainty. It is data and undeniable fact. It is the proof and final word that triumphs over everything else. Truth is a weapon. It represents control and power. In China and Russia, truth is maintained by the government. Their 'facts' are the only facts. And they support whatever want. If someone questions the 'truth' they are told, then they are put in jail or killed. The church has not been immune from defending its truth. In the 17th century, Galileo, was arrested by the church. He had observed that the earth revolved around the sun, not the other way around. But this idea contradicted what the church taught and what was in the Bible, which was that the sun revolved around the earth. The church didn't want Galileo's new discoveries, it wanted control. And they forced Galileo to recant or he would be killed as a heretic.

It's shocking to think that people would ever try to deny the truth or cover it up or keep others in the dark. But some people don't want to see. They don't want things to come to light. Especially if it takes away their power and control. People like power and control. Especially if they can say it comes from God. And they can use the Bible as a

weapon. Christians have used God's word to promote slavery and deny rights to women and reject interracial marriage. They have used it to demonize the queer community and deny people medical care. They say the truth of the Bible demands that they reject science and evolution and care for the planet. It even demands that they reject their own children if their children are in the wrong.

But Jesus says that truth is more than words printed in the Bible. Truth is not based on a scriptural answer key. Truth is sight. It is vision given by God. It is seeing things in the light of God's Spirit and God's grace. It is not certainty, but clarity. Realizing the big picture and recognizing all that is connected. And believing that God really does love all of this.

That God loves the world and wants to save it. And to do that, God will give up God's only son. And that kind of love is the truth that matters.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that those who have the eyes to see will see and understand. He tells Nicodemus that the Son of Man must be lifted up.

And whoever see this and believes will have eternal life. Nicodemus doesn't understand yet. No one can understand yet, that Jesus is the Son of Man and he will be lifted up on a cross. And people will see the truth.

The whole world will be confronted with the truth about God. They will be confronted with the truth about themselves.

On the cross, the truth will be revealed. The truth about God is that God is love. And God does not seek power over us or control of our lives. On the cross, we see God. We see Jesus, weak and unable to fight. He is powerless. But he is on the cross because he wants to be. He needs to be. God loves us more than being certain. God loves us more than being right. God loves us even if that makes God wrong in the eyes of the law. Even if it violates the scripture and makes Jesus a blasphemer and a heretic. Jesus won't recant his message. He won't abandon the truth that the least are the greatest and the last will be first. And the Spirit invites whomever it will into the kingdom of God.

Jesus is lifted up on the cross, we see how much God loves the world. We see the truth of how far God is willing to go. And how faithful God truly is. And that need to protect the truth or defend it violently, that's our issue, not God's. Put away your sword, Peter, says Jesus when he tries to defend him. The kingdom of God isn't worth killing for. But it is worth dying for.

When Jesus is lifted up, it reveals the truth about us too. The light shines in the darkness, but we prefer the darkness. We would rather not see reality. We would rather stay blind. We would rather believe in lies. And pretend that we are righteous and noble. Instead of actually being righteous and noble. We would rather pretend we are the good guys. And we are better than the bad guys. But we are just as selfish. Just as arrogant. Just as prone to believing what is false and harmful. And it's only by God's grace that we are here.

I really like going to the Hope Center to serve meals. One reason is that it feels good to help. Another reason is that the men who work there are refreshingly honest. Every month, it's a different group of guys doing kitchen duty as part of their recovery program. And they tell you exactly how they got here. How they made bad decisions and made mistakes. How they lost family and friends. And they need to be in treatment. Telling the truth is part of the process. It's part of the twelve steps of AA. To be honest. To confess what you did wrong. To make amends with others when you can. If you want to be in recovery, truth is necessary.

The apostle Paul says that love rejoices in the truth. Even if it hurts. Even if it is hard to face. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. The cross reveals everything about us. But we don't hide from it, or avoid it or cover it up or shift the blame. We acknowledge it. We admit our own part in it. How we have put love up there on the cross. And hurt others and made others suffer. How we let them be blamed and crucified. So we could hide in the dark. The truth is, is that all of us are capable of it. All of us could put Jesus on that cross. And it is only the light of the truth will save us. We have to be honest. We have to confess our failures. We have to see the ways we have loved power and privilege. The ways we have hoped our own group loyalty and patriotism and religion would save us. How we have given up believing that God in Jesus Christ will save us. But when we see Jesus lifted up on the cross, we see the truth. Only then do we know. Only then do we understand. That the truth is love. And LOVE is the truth. And that is what we hope in. That is what we believe in. That is the vision of God's kingdom. And all other knowledge will

end. All other certainty. All other insight and understanding. It will end.

And the only truth we will see is love. And love will be our only truth.