

Truth Telling

John 18:12-27

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin with a general word about the season of Lent. Every year, I have at least one (usually more) conversation with someone, either in our church or outside, that goes something like this.

You know, Lent wasn't really a thing for me when I was growing up or in the church I was raised in. We kind of did Good Friday and Easter Sunday and Christmas and that was about it for our "Christian calendar."

To which I usually say, "Yeah, me, too."

I've spoken often about how I have come to appreciate the Christian calendar and how it helps us keep time according to the story of Jesus rather than the shopping seasons. But it came relatively late. I was into my thirties before seasons like Lent began to kind of take root in my faith and experience.

So, why do we observe Lent?

To explain part of the reason, I want to begin with a story (and I'll ask you to bear with me).

A few years ago, I spent a Monday morning in a packed hotel conference room full of community leaders who had been summoned to hear a presentation on a plan initiated by our city called the "Community Wellbeing and Safety Strategy."

Like many cities, ours was facing significant challenges. Poverty, homelessness, crime, lack of affordable housing, and, of course, the scourges of addiction, mental health issues, and racism that bleed into all the others. The opioid crisis was hitting our city hard.

And this spun out into all kinds of social realities that heighten suspicions and diminish good will in our community. The picture of the reality on the ground we were presented with

was bleak. “We can’t fix these problems on our own,” the city representatives said. “We need your help.”

How were the problems to be fixed?

Well, the solution was an “integrative social ecosystem” where all the various “stakeholders” (including the “faith sector”) were in dialogue to mobilize “social capital” and to ensure that the “support industry” was working with maximum efficiency to deliver the best possible “return on investment.”

The problem wasn’t a lack of money or good will. The system was the issue. Fix the system, fix the problem.

Now, I have little doubt that a better system with better communication and collaboration and less overlap, waste, and territorial suspicions would improve the social reality in our community.

But the language we use and the assumptions that underly it is fascinating, isn’t it? Words like “stakeholders,” “capital,” “industry,” “sectors,” and “return on investment” point to a very specific way of understanding the nature of both the problems and their potential solutions.

If the problems are technical and political the solutions must be technical and political. If the overlapping crises in our community are, at their core, the result of faulty, inefficient systems, then what is required is a new, better system.

Just get the right amount of the right kinds of resources arranged and allocated in the right ways and get out of the way of the social transformation train, right?!

Well, no.

If there’s one thing history has proved beyond doubt it’s that you can fix the system, you can change how the resources are allocated, you can attempt different politics, and still not fix the problem.

We can do our best to ensure that funds are being used wisely, but that won’t change the ways in which we easily and naturally “other” people in our community.

We can do our best to avoid overlapping social services, but that won't do much to address the absent/abusive parents that are in the rearview mirror of almost every addict's story.

We can build supportive housing facilities to assist those struggling with poverty, loneliness, and mental illness, but this won't convince people that it is their moral duty to love their neighbours.

Four days ago, Lent began with Ash Wednesday. This is not my favourite day of the Christian calendar. It is a day where my task is to tell people two uncomfortable truths: You are a sinner, and you're going to die.

I don't like telling you this. I'd rather tell you that God loves you and that everything's going to be ok (I usually find a way to tell you this anyway, truth be told).

But each year Ash Wednesday reminds me that a robust and truly *Christian* view of human nature is a gift to the church and the world. **It tells the truth of who we are.**

This is a message addressed to human beings, not "social capital" or "stakeholders" or "high needs users of the system."

It is not systems that can experience moral or spiritual awakening. It is not systems whose hearts can be softened to the cries of the poor and the cast aside. It is not systems who can listen for layers of pain behind social issues.

It is not systems that can be trained to love. No, these are tasks for human beings.

And this is why we need Lent. To tell the truth about who we are and to allow the Spirit of God to retrain our hearts.

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This year during Lent, on the Sundays where we're not on a retreat or hosting our MCA Delegate session, we're going to be using resources with theme "Dwelling in Dissonance."

Here's what the creators of this year's resources say:

Most years, the season of Lent is meant to prepare us for Holy Week. This year, the entire season of Lent is framed by the experience of Holy Week, inviting us to linger in the intensity of the final week of Jesus' life, to dwell in the dissonance...

In music, dissonance occurs when two or more notes strike the listener as discordant. Our ear instinctively knows the note that will bring resolution and wants the dissonance to resolve to something more harmonious. Similarly, we might be tempted to rush through the discord within these Lenten texts, anticipating the already-and-not-yet resolution of Easter. Can we receive the gift of the dissonance: the sense of both/and in all this season's stories and in our world, the knowing and not knowing, the tension between how things are and how one wants things to be?

I think we can. And we must.

Our text today is a dissonant one. It gives us two scenes from John's gospel. Two scenes that are happening at the same time. Two scenes that tell the truth in different ways.

In the first scene, Jesus in front of the high priest to answer some questions. John's gospel doesn't say what the high priest asked Jesus, specifically. It simply says they "questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching" (18:19).

And Jesus tells the truth.

He knows very well that the religious leaders have no real interest in what he actually taught, about the kingdom he has enacted and proclaimed. He knows that there is one outcome that is desired in this questioning and one outcome that will come about.

And so, he says, "I have spoken publicly. I've not hidden what I'm doing or what I'm about. As for my disciples, ask them, too, while you're at it. They'll tell you what you say you want to know."

In this response, Jesus tells the truth on two levels. He tells the truth about his teaching. He does not seek to hide or obfuscate to save his own skin. He is bold and transparent. He stands by what he has said and done.

He also tells the truth about the religious leaders, about their duplicity, about the craven ways in which they are clinging to power, about their fear and suspicion and pride.

He exposes them with just a few words.

And he earns himself a smack across the face for his troubles. Thus it has ever been when the powerful are exposed. When you can't defend your actions with words or the facts, violence is all too often not far behind.

The second scene also tells the truth even though it is a scene of deception and failure.

The second scene takes place on either side of Jesus' "interview." Peter has been banished to the courtyard, not permitted to accompany Jesus to his appointment with the High Priest.

... but Peter had to wait outside at the door... (18:16).

Knowing what we do of Peter thus far in the gospels—he of the breathless declarations of loyalty, the big ideas and pronouncements, Peter the star pupil, the "rock" upon whom Christ would build his church—we can imagine that Peter is seething at his treatment.

He should be in there with Jesus where the action is, not outside with the servant girls trying to stay warm by the fire on a cold night.

"You're one his disciples, aren't you?" the servant girl asks him.

I've often wondered what went on in Peter's mind at this point. Was it cowardice or expedience or strategic avoidance or some combination of these things that led to his first response.

I am not.

Three words. But such heavy words.

xWords when we betray our truest selves and our deepest convictions are always heavy.

As if once wasn't enough, Peter repeats his denial twice more on the other side of Jesus' interrogation.

Two more denials, just as Jesus predicted. The rooster crows and Peter's misery is complete.

Other gospels describe him weeping at the realization of what he has done. In John, we are simply left with a rooster's crow.

How does a scene of deception tell the truth?

Quite simply, it tells the truth of who we are.

We are all Peter. We're deniers, truth-avoiders, truth-evaders, each one of us.

Not all to the same extent. Not all with the same catastrophic consequences. But on some level, however small, we can all see ourselves in Peter's denial.

Just like we can see ourselves in James and John's lust for the fire of judgment, in Thomas's doubt, and Mary's tears. Just like, if we are honest, we can see ourselves in Judas' outright betrayal of Jesus.

The story of Jesus' disciples at his darkest hour is not flattering. For the most part, they scatter, they flee, they are nowhere to be seen. They deny and they betray, in implicit and explicit ways.

And so do we. This is the truth of who we are.

This is the truth that fixing the system cannot fix for it is a deep truth of the human heart. This is the dark truth that God alone can heal and redeem.

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There's a third scene where the truth is told that I can't resist including even in a Lenten sermon.

It's in the last chapter of John's gospel. It takes place after the resurrection, so we're going out of order here. John 21 is for the season of Easter, not Lent.

But we live on this side of the resurrection, thanks be to God. And we're allowed to get the order wrong from time to time. 😊

Peter was among the disciples who “rejoiced” when Jesus appeared to him behind closed doors. But the first time we see Peter saying anything specific after his denial in the courtyard is to say, “I’m going fishing.”

Peter has seen the empty tomb; he has seen the risen Christ. He knows everything has changed, even if he doesn’t exactly know how.

I wonder how Peter is doing at this point of the story. I wonder if he is still weighed down by the shame of his denial.

At any rate, Peter and his compatriots are out on the sea, fishing, not catching anything. And the risen Jesus appears again on the shore.

Next thing you know, Jesus is producing a miraculous catch of fish and Peter is off like a rocket, swimming to the shore.

When he gets there, Jesus has another charcoal fire going. How interesting that Scripture would include this detail. There are two mentions of charcoal in the whole bible. One in the courtyard when Peter denies Jesus. And one here on the beach.

Jesus makes breakfast for his friends. And then he asks Peter three times if he loves him. One time for each denial.

Each time, Peter says, “You know I love you.” Each time Jesus tells Peter to feed his lambs. Take care of my friends and followers when I’m gone.

It’s a beautiful scene of Jesus restoring one who denied him explicitly.

Out at the jail a few weeks ago, we read the story of the parable of the lost son. We talked about a Father who waits at the gate for a son who denied him and wasted his inheritance, a son who did everything he could to make himself unlovable and a Father whose love knew no limit.

We got to the end, and one of the guys said. “Man, it would be so cool if that was what God was like.”

I looked at him and said the only I think I could think of to say. “That *is* what God is like.” This is the truth of who God is.

Jesus demonstrates it here with Peter. Like the story of the lost son, Jesus reaches out to him. He's waiting, not at a gate but on a beach. But he's waiting with a love that welcomes sinners home, that seeks always to restore, to reclaim, to redeem.

This week, I read an article by Episcopal priest Tish Harrison Warren called "Not All Right." I want to read a portion of it and as you listen, I want you to think of Peter in the courtyard, denying his Lord, and about all of us who deny Jesus in our own ways every day:

Jesus calls the weary to himself. He does not call the self-sufficient, nor those with the proper religious credentials or perfect, Instagram-able lives. He calls those exhausted from toil, from just getting through the day. He calls those burdened with heavy loads, those weighed down by sin and sorrow. It is these, not the confident and successful, to whom Jesus says, "Come to me."

The good news of Jesus is not that we get a merit badge for being put together and hope that God ignores our failures. We serve God not only with our strengths, but in our weaknesses.

The ones Jesus calls are the weary ones, the ones who snap at those they love after a long day, the ones who battle addiction, the ones who aren't who they wish they were, the ones who know they are not strong, the ones who wrestle and repent, who fail and fail again. This is the church, these ones through whom Jesus is strong.¹

May God help us to be truth-tellers as we follow the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

And when we don't tell the truth, may God teach us keep running back to the Friend of Sinners, the one who is always seeking to restore, reclaim, and redeem that which is lost.

Amen.



¹ <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/prayer/give-rest-to-the-weary>