

Jeremiah 20:7-13

O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. For I hear many whispering: "Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"

All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. "Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him." But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonor will never be forgotten. O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.

The Pain of the Truth - June 21, 2020

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Which is easier, knowing the truth about something and not being able to say it, or knowing the truth and being compelled to say it?

I really feel for some of our politicians. It's painfully obvious as this election cycle progresses that some of them, when cornered by reporters, are wrestling with saying what they really think versus keeping it trapped inside for the sake of being re-elected or getting some cushy job after leaving office.

Now we can get indignant and say, they are public servants, we put them in office to put country first, not politics. Indeed we do. Just as the military is supposed to be concerned only about our nation's safety and our police are supposed to honor the slogan "to serve and protect."

However, the truth about the truth is that it is seldom that easy to be totally honest with others and especially honest with ourselves.

When we look inside ourselves, really look, we know we have secrets we don't want the world to be aware of. We all know things about people or events that could really damage them if they got out. Pastors like myself, but also doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals are told things in the course of their work that they absolutely must keep secret. None of us can go home and tell our spouses, "Guess what I learned today?" No. We have to live with the knowledge that we know things, sometimes terrible things, but must keep it inside.

Why? Why can't we just reveal the secrets we know? Why can't we just tell the truth about everything? We know why. Hiding the truth or minimizing the truth or skirting the truth is how society lubricates itself. There are very few who when asked, "How do I look?" from our partners or significant others would dare say anything but, "Just great!" Maybe if there's a stain on their clothes or their hair is really messed up, we'd say something. Otherwise, we tend to keep quiet.

The bigger the truth, of course, the more stress we face about keeping in locked inside. The point of professions like psychologists and social workers is to help people admit the truth about their personal situations to themselves so they can change for the better. Likewise, my role as pastor is to tell you, my congregation, my understanding about the truth of God's word, so you will try to adjust your thinking and change your attitudes toward life and living.

Note that I said, "My understanding of the truth." Jesus, when he went before Pontius Pilate, stated in John's gospel, "For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate responded, "What is truth?"

It doesn't take much time to figure out that there are multiple versions of truth in the world. It is amazing that for whatever event happens in our world, there are an almost endless variety of versions reporting what happened. You can go to one news channel and get their version and turn to another and get the exact opposite. Social media is filled with people offering their own views and

opinions. Pilate therefore is accurately reflecting the attitudes of today when he asks what truth is. Back then, just as today, it is hard to determine what truth is and what fantasy is. The present administration has coined the term “alternative facts” to offer their story, claiming that their version is as good as any other just because they say it is.

So is there such a thing as truth? I mean, why should you listen to me preach when someone else also trained in theology can look at the same bible and reach totally different conclusions. Am I right? Is the other person right? Are we both right? Are we both wrong? Or does any of it matter because at the end of the day, we have no way to separate truth from lies?

Until fairly recently, the church or organized religion served human beings as the arbiter and spreader of truth. No subject was beyond the reach of religious authorities. We may be amused that only a few hundred years ago, the church was promoting the idea that the earth was flat. Yet there are many Christians today who firmly believe the earth was created about 7000 years ago because they regard the biblical text as scientific truth. Personally, it makes no difference to me as to when you believe God created the earth. The scriptures are far more about the truth of living what God intends for us: a genuine human life. Whether the universe was created 7000 years ago or 14 billion years ago does not change Jesus’ command that we must love the Lord our God and love our neighbors as ourselves. That is my truth and that is truth I strive to offer you each week.

Love God; love your neighbor as yourself. If you look at your life and the lives of friends and family, don’t most of the issues we really struggle with in life boil down to whether and how much we love God and love our neighbors as ourselves?

These two laws are simple. Following them is not. Loving God means putting God and God’s commandments before everything else in life: before people, before work, before possessions, before all other considerations. And we don’t. We constantly try to persuade ourselves that what we want in life is better than what God wants for us. Our plans, our dreams, our thoughts are superior to God’s. In fact, who needs God. I am God. You are God. We collectively have far more wisdom than God ever could.

Sure, it’s cool to find god in the sunrise or find god lurking in a crystal, but those gods are utterly disposable and utterly forgettable. Will we choose to worship ourselves and our own desires or will we worship the one true God and what God desires for all of us? What choice is better for me, what choice is better for you, what choice is better for all of us? Aren’t those the considerations we should be making in deciding what to do in life?

The obvious answer is yes, that is what we should be doing. The equally obvious answer is no, that not what we are doing. When you look at the basic plan for human life and living God outlined in the Ten Commandments, can anyone disagree with any of it? Don’t we waste so much precious time and cause so much pain for ourselves and the world by rationalizing how to get around God’s plan? When we lie, cheat, steal, put ourselves ahead of others, are we really making a better world for everyone? A world which can endure? A world in which everyone is lifted up instead of torn down?

Likewise, Jesus reminds us to love our neighbors, even our enemies, as ourselves. Isn't so much of the strife in the world all about our selectively defining who are neighbors are and who they are not? Was George Floyd my neighbor? It is gratifying to see many claim in the protests that he is. But he was also our neighbor before any of this happened — he, along with millions and millions of neighbors all over our nation and our world who are not being loved or respected or welcomed in the same way many of us are.

This is the truth I want to stand on and the truth I want to proclaim: we are on this earth to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. I am good at doing these things sometimes, I am terrible at doing these things other times. But whether I am good or bad, they remain my truth. Everything, everything, everything in life needs to be weighed in terms of whether they are in line with God's plan and how they affect my neighbor.

The more I can conform my life to these two truths, the better off I will be. The more society can conform itself to these two truths, the better off society will be. We ignore these truths not only at risk to ourselves, but at risk to the world. The world is full of examples of leaders who put themselves ahead of God and ahead of others to get what they wanted. Such people may be admired for a time because their example sets the pattern for their followers. In other words, many may think, "Well, if he can get away with lying, cheating, stealing, disrespecting and hating others and not wearing a mask, why can't I?"

And that attitude works — at least for a while. Me first, ahead of God, ahead of everyone else. It can make you feel like you're in charge and superior to everyone else. "To heck with the system, what has it ever done for me?"

But as we have been seeing recently, and even more today, hasn't such a selfish and me-first attitude resulted in endless problems for our world, for our nation, and yes, for ourselves? What has ignoring the environment brought us? Climate change. What has systemic racism brought us? Not just the protests, but the tragic loss of so much human potential — potential to change the world — limited because of so many ridiculous ideas about how "normal people" are supposed to think, act, dress, and behave. What has following incompetent leaders brought us? Sickness in pandemics, economic collapse and unemployment, and artificial divisions among us.

Friends, there is truth in this world. There is a definitive way to look at life and living that, forgive my use of the word, "trumps" every other idea, every other thought: Love God, love your neighbor as yourself.

The prophet Jeremiah knew this. He knew truth. He saw for himself the consequences of ignoring God's plan and society treating people like dirt. Jeremiah worked about 2500 years ago in Israel. He saw a society in chaos, moving closer and closer to collapse. What was going on? Nothing more and nothing less than what is happening today: the rich stealing land from the poor and making the poor work on the land they used to own. Kings and rulers lavishing all kinds of luxuries on themselves,

while many starved. Excluding widows and orphans from even the most basic needs of life. Taking command of the religious establishment, choosing priests who would bless the most evil actions.

Jeremiah was called by God to tell the truth about the world everywhere he went. Needless to say, he didn't like his job. Would you?

That, friends, is the problem with telling the truth. That is the problem with putting God's plan first and putting your neighbors before yourself. We know, deep down, if we any sort of conscience, if we have any sort of awareness of the Holy Spirit inside us, we know that the truth the Jeremiahs of the world proclaim or the Christs of the world proclaim, or the Martin Luthers proclaim, or the Susan B. Anthony's and Sojourner Truths proclaim, or the Nelson Mandelas or Mahatma Gandhis proclaim: the present system is wrong and it must be changed.

But all of these prophets, all of these truth tellers, all over history and to the present day — all of them experienced the same obstacles as Jeremiah. All of them heard the words of the crowds shouting "Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!". We have leaders who criticize and denounce the truth tellers in our own time, right now. And we have those who know the truth, but choose to stay silent when their testimony is most needed.

But Jeremiah, despite the attacks, despite the haters, despite all the obstacles placed in his way, continued to speak, continued to tell God's truth. The fact was that he had no choice. He declared that, "within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." He could not. He could not. Just like Jesus, just like Luther, just like Susan Anthony and Sojourner Truth and the courageous whistleblowers and fired inspectors general and the march leaders and the doctors defying their so-called health agencies and warning Covid-19 is still here. All of them paid and are paying a terrible price for telling the truth. They are all putting God's plan and God's love and their neighbors' interests far, far ahead of their own.

My only question is, can we, will we do the same?

Friends, the truth can be painful. Telling the truth cost Jeremiah and all these others so very, very much. That is why the symbol of our faith is the cross, because the cross tells us plainly that Jesus died for the sake of truth. When we tell the truth, when we do the right thing instead of the easy thing or the popular thing — a part of us suffers, no doubt.

But for us, the cross is also an empty cross. Because the empty cross tells us that God vindicated the truth by leaving Jesus not buried, but very much alive. Jeremiah felt this as well. He declared, "the Lord is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed."

This is what the coming months and years are about. Will we dare to embrace the truth, knowing full well its potential to cause us suffering and pain, but also knowing that if humanity is to survive and thrive, we have no choice? Or will we just go along, looking out for ourselves, ignoring the pain of the world and watching everything just crumble away. God's plan or our plan. It's time to decide.