

EXILE: Only the Truth Will Do.

Jeremiah 6:9-10, 13-16; John 8:31-38.

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DO YOU WANT TO KNOW THE TRUTH?

“Do you want to know the truth?”

You and I might assume the answer to that question would be, “Yes.”

But often the answer is, “No.”

We like to think we are people of the truth.

We like to think we’re open to the truth. Resilient enough to engage the truth and let what we learn shape how we live. We’re not simply guided by our gut instinct, by impulse, by tradition, by what we’ve done in the past, by the needs and values of our tribe or family or nation, but we are people whose lives are grounded in what is true: that’s what we like to think.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. & Birmingham Religious Leaders.

When I was growing up a lot of the good white people sitting in Christian churches across America thought Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a troublemaker. They didn’t see him as a patriot or a hero but a troublemaker. Things would be okay, many people said, if he would just stop going from city to city. Preaching sermons about justice and civil rights.

Back in 1963 Dr. King helped lead a boycott of the public bus system in Montgomery, Alabama. Dr. King led a march against the racist laws that degraded the lives of black Americans.

A group of religious leaders of the city decided they needed to make a public response to Dr. King. These religious leaders -calling themselves the Reconciliation Committee- issued a public document they labeled *A Call for Unity*. The leaders included the Roman Catholic bishop, the Episcopal bishop, a Jewish rabbi, the Methodist bishop, and the Presbyterian moderator wrote this document that said (in part): “Just as we formerly pointed out that ‘hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions,’ we also point out that such actions that incite hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems. We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified in Birmingham.”

These good people, these religious leaders, were telling Dr. King to stop. To be quiet. To swallow the truth rather than speaking it. They were saying Dr. King was causing the problem by speaking the truth.

Dr. King, while he was in jail, authored something called *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, and in that document he said this: “I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his march towards freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Klu Klux Klanner, but the white ‘moderate’ who is more ‘devoted’ to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says : ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of ‘direction action’; who paternalistically

believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advised the Negro to wait for 'a more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

"Actually, we who engage in active nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and be dealt with, like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured."

Don't talk. We don't want to deal with the turmoil and uncertainty and change and risk associated with the truth you insist on bringing to the surface.

We don't want to hear the truth.

That's what those good, Christian and Jewish religious leaders were saying.

Mark & His Friend's Less Than Excellent Adventure.

Over a decade ago I spent the better part of three years avoiding the truth. A good friend and I were working together, and we spent a whole lot of energy avoiding the truth. Being polite with one another. Never dealing with the stuff that was paralyzing our relationship.

On the surface everything was good.

The relationship, though, was brittle. Frozen. Unproductive.

We looked like a team.

But we weren't a team.

We were two people who happened to work under the same roof.

So one day (much to my surprise) he interrupted a church staff meeting with an apology. He told our staff he had been doing his own thing. Refusing to take seriously the congregation's vision for mission and intentionally disregarding my leadership.

His courage opened the door to truth.

His courage, his willingness to take a risk, pulled me out of a posture of silence...of denial. (Because, you see, one of my great sins is that I will sometimes be kind rather than honest... and things that should be dealt with or said or worked through never are touched.)

My friend's courage, his apology to me in front of the staff, broke things loose. He and I left the staff meeting. We walked down the hall to my office, closed the door, and began to get honest with one another. It was hard work...and it was good.

Honestly, though, the truth has a way of scaring me. Because the truth often challenges the way things are...the way I am. And it often means work.

The Moment in "A Few Good Men."

Do you remember that court martial scene near the end of the film *A Few Good Men*? An officer by the name of Jessep, played by Jack Nicholson, is on the witness stand. He is being questioned by a young Judge Advocate officer named Kaffee.

"You want answers?" the older officer asks.

Kaffee, played by Tom Cruise, answers, “I think I’m entitled to them.”
“You want answers?”
“I want the truth!”
“You can’t handle the truth!” Jessep shouts back.

EXILE & JEREMIAH: A WORLD UPSIDE-DOWN. (I Want to Go back...I’m Angry with God.)

So here we are.

In this series of messages called EXILE.

The people of Judah and Jerusalem were surrounded by enemies when the prophet Jeremiah was speaking up for God. By 603 B.C. Judah had been swallowed up by the Babylonian Empire. Oh, Judah still had its own king and army and culture. But the Babylonians “called the shots.” It was sort of like Poland or East Germany when those nations were controlled by the Soviet Union.

People in Judah decided they wanted to regain their independence. So they plotted to break free of Babylon. Building up the army, making military alliances, throwing out the Babylonians, was the popular position to take. When people are waving the flag, when people are talking about loving your country and national security, it takes a lot of courage to hold up your hand and say, “What if we’re wrong?”

Jeremiah did just that.

Jeremiah told people they were making a mistake.

Things are unsettled in Judah.

Nothing seems right.

Everything feels upside-down.

The people want to go back to the way things used to be.

Exile.

That’s what we named this series of messages.

Because things seem unsettled for a lot of people.

Too much feels not right.

So many things feel upside-down.

We have the feeling we have lost something...our way...and we want to go back to the way it was when things felt right. We want to go back to a time when we didn’t feel so insecure, so unsettled, so puzzled, so overwhelmed.

A God Who Looks for Good Grapes in Terrible Times.

If you open your Bible to the 6th chapter of Jeremiah, you’ll see the prophet saying the enemy from the north and east is about to swoop down on Jerusalem. In fact, in The Message, the heading for this chapter is *A City Full of Lies*. Jerusalem has become a city full of lies. Where the rich get richer and the poor are forgotten. Where it seems everyone is only interested in what’s best for them. Where the people have turned their back on God and are worshipping one idol after another. Where leaders don’t lead by serving the people but serve themselves. Where priests go through the motions of speaking the truth of God, but really all the preachers and priests do is say what they know the people want to hear. Preachers would

please the members of the Staff Parish Relations Committee, they'd rather wow the people and draw big crowds, than say what God wants said.

Jerusalem is in trouble. It has become a city full of lies. The people insist on doing their own thing in their own way, and they refuse to let God lead.

God, through the prophet in verse 8 says: *You're in deep trouble, Jerusalem. You've pushed me to the limit. You're on the brink of being wiped out, being turned into a ghost town.*

Today's reading begins with the next verse (9): *Time's up! Harvest the grapes for judgment. Salvage what's left of Israel. Go back over the vines. Pick them clean, every last grape.*

The book of Jeremiah is full of vivid images. Here is a picture of a farmer harvesting grapes. The farmer is being very careful. Going over each vine. Being sure not to miss a grape.

The verse is a reminder that every one of us -and every nation- will stand before God. End up, one way or another, dealing with God. Another word for that is judgment.

The verse is also a reminder that God is looking for the good in the middle of a terrible time. A painful chapter. God is looking for every bit of good. Using his hands to feel along each vine looking for each grape. God doesn't want to miss one, single grape. God doesn't want to miss one single good thing. There is good and God is looking for it.

Is it possible that there is good, somehow, even in the tough chapters of life? Is it possible that inside this moment in history, inside what we are going through as a church or family or nation, there is a God-given opportunity to grow...go deeper...become more alive?

God, in Jeremiah 6:9, is looking for every last good grape. This is the kind of God we have. We have a God who is looking for the good...eager to harvest the good.

Is Anyone Listening?

Jeremiah has been speaking up for God.

And what God has been trying to do is wake up the people.

Turn them around.

God doesn't want the people to suffer or be destroyed.

No one seems to be listening, though.

Listen to Jeremiah 6:10-11: *I've got something to say. Is anybody listening? I've a warning to post. Will anyone notice? It's hopeless! Their ears are stuffed with wax -deaf as a post, blind as a bat. It's hopeless! They've tuned out God. They don't want to hear from me. But I'm bursting with the wrath of God. I can't hold it in much longer.*

Sometimes, you know, we lose our ability to hear God...receive truth...over time. The way our ears can fill up with wax. I'm always amazed, when I hang out with children, what they hear and see and notice that I just don't even pick up. Live long enough, get busy enough, move fast enough, and you can -if you're not careful- stop seeing. Stop hearing. Jeremiah says it is like the people have got wax in their ears.

Sometimes we decide to block God.

Remember that story in the 19th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew? A man comes to Jesus and says, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Jesus says the key is to do what God tells you to do.

"What in particular?" the man asks.

Jesus goes through the Ten Commandments. All of it is familiar. Well known. There are no surprises in the list.

The man who has come to Jesus says he has done all that. He hasn't murdered anyone or committed adultery or stolen or lied. He has honored his father and mother. He has loved his neighbor as he loves himself.

"I've done all that," the man says. "What's left?"

Jesus has this way of knowing our weak spot. The place in our lives where we refuse to let God take control. He can see that in this man's life it is money...his possessions. So Jesus says, *"If you want to give it all you've got, go sell your possessions, give everything to the poor. All your wealth will be in heaven. Then come follow me."*

That was the last thing the young man expected to hear, Matthew tells us (19:22). It wasn't something he was willing to do. So he walked away. He tuned God out.

Who Wants to Hear This Stuff?

Jeremiah says: *I've got something to say. Is anybody listening? I've a warning to post. Will anyone notice?*

If you look at Jeremiah 6:13-15, you'll hear a description of how bad things have gotten in Judah: *"Everyone's after the dishonest dollar; little people and big people alike. Prophets and priests and everyone in between twists words and doctor truth. My people are broken -shattered!- and they put on band-aids. (The priests and preachers say) 'It's not so bad. You'll be just fine.' But things are not 'just fine!' Do you suppose they are embarrassed over this outrage? No, they have no shame. They don't even know how to blush. There's no hope for them. They've hit bottom and there's no getting up. As far as I'm concerned, they're finished."*

Do you know what makes the situation hopeless?

The people who should be listening for God's voice, relaying what God is saying to the people, are saying "Peace, peace!" when there is no peace. They are telling people that things are fine, that things will soon be back to normal, but things aren't fine. The nation is afflicted with gutless preachers. Who love the people too much to tell them the hard truth.

And even when they muster up the courage to speak the hard truth, the people won't hear it.

The people have stopped listening to God.

Truth can mess with our lives.

Truth has this way of unsettling us. Making us uncomfortable.

Truth brings change.

Truth probably means work.

So I understand our reluctance to let God's truth in.

Especially when we're told, as Jeremiah tells the people, God is using our enemies to push us towards a new beginning.

Especially when we're told, as Jeremiah tells the people, we have forsaken God. Started worshipping idols. We don't like to hear that. We like to pretend God is God to us even when God isn't. I was explaining to someone that the typical Jesus follower, in a Methodist church, gives about 2% of what they have to God as an offering. But 2% of what we have isn't an offering. It's a token. A token. "Here, God," we are saying. "You are my God this much..." I

understand our desire to shut out the news that we have wandered away from God and started worshipping idols...made gods out of other things.

I understand our reluctance to let God's truth in.

Especially when we're told, as Jeremiah tells the people (5:28), the nation has become indifferent to the poor. People care more about getting rich than looking out for the poor. Greed is all over (6:12, 8:10) but the poor are forgotten. We don't like to hear that. Jeremiah says -5- "*they have no conscience. Right and wrong mean nothing to them. They stand for nothing, stand up for no one, throw orphans to the wolves, exploit the poor.*" We don't like it when God points out that more children are living in poverty today than there were last year...or the year before...or the year before that.

Especially when we're told, as Jeremiah tells the people (22:13), about the rich who build palaces but cheat their workers...not paying them for their work.

Especially when we're told, as Jeremiah tells the people, that the preacher types from places like Garrett-Evangelical and Duke are gutless...spineless...worthless shepherds. Who wants to hear that?

The Truth We Don't Want to Hear is the Truth that Can Set Us Free.

Here is the thing: the last thing in the world we want to hear from God is often the one thing we most need to hear. The last thing in the world we want to hear from God is often the one thing that can set us free...bring us the new life we need...move us towards that abundant life Jesus talks about in John 10:10.

There is a verse about the power of God's truth to cut through the tangled, broken, locked-up places of our lives. Look at Hebrews 4:12: *God means what he says. What he says goes. His powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defense, laying us open to listen and obey. Nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it – no matter what.*

What is the truth God has for us in this chapter we are going through together?

What truth is becoming clear to you as you see where we are as a nation...a people? What is God saying to the world...to our nation...to our city...to our families...to the church...to you? What have we become...what needs to change...how does the next chapter in our life need to be different than the way things have been?

I'd like you to take a moment...think about that...turn to someone around you and tell them one thing God has shown you, is showing you, through the stuff that is going on in our nation...community...your life...right now?

(The people talk...and then are invited to share out loud.)

What is God telling us?

You see, I think we are a place as a nation...and as a church...and as people...where only the truth will do. No going through the motions. No pretending. No making up our own answers.

Maybe God is telling us we've been going through the motions of faithfulness and it is time to get real.

Maybe God is telling us things have started to mean more to us than people. And it should be the other way around.

Maybe God is telling us that we lost, somewhere along the way, the ability to be content. So we have let this yawning discontent drive us...always needing more, always wanting to go faster, always wanting to climb higher. Never content.

Maybe God is telling us that we have lost our sense of justice. We have grown indifferent to what is wrong...and just accept it. Too easily.

Maybe God is telling us we had better start caring about the poor.

Maybe God is telling us we need to do life together, as brothers and sisters, as neighbors, and look out for one another.

Maybe God is telling us that we need to keep our promises...to God...to one another... to ourselves.

Maybe God is telling us our leaders need to work together rather than insisting on their own way...and trying to make the people on the other side of the aisle look bad.

Maybe God is telling us our preachers and priests had better start loving God more than they care about pleasing people...or drawing crowds. Maybe God is telling us preachers who won't tell the people of God the hard truth of God aren't worth the space they take up.

Maybe God is telling us that our security isn't all about military force or political alliances, but it has something to do with being right with God...and doing the right things... pursuing justice.

WHY DOES GOD KEEP SPEAKING THE TRUTH?

Do you know what God keeps speaking through Jeremiah and the other prophets? Do you know why God bothers to keep irritating us with his truth? Because God loves us.

God keeps speaking the truth because God wants us to come back... God wants us to return to him...God wants us to be free and whole.

God keeps speaking because God loves us.

One of my best friends in the whole world has been going through an adventure with his adult children. His son and daughter in law have been trying to get pregnant for several years. After a lot of prayer and trips to several doctors, they realize that isn't going to happen. So this young couple decided, two years ago, to adopt a child from Ethiopia.

They've been working with an adoption agency in Ethiopia over the last year. I've been reading some of the notes they have been keeping about their adventure. They have been keeping an on-line journal about the sadness of all this, the prayers, the decision to adopt, and about the preparations. They've talked about preparing the bedroom. Painting. Buying clothes and blankets. They've sent a picture of this beautiful young boy who they have named Levi.

This past Friday they flew from Indianapolis to Ethiopia.

It's not been an easy week.

You see just a couple days ago the whole thing was put on hold. There was suddenly some question about the adoption agency. So the American embassy in Addis Ababa said, "Don't come. Everything is frozen. If you come to Africa you can't get your child."

So this couple has been confused. Frustrated. Heartbroken. Not sure whether to go to Africa on Friday afternoon or stay put in Fort Wayne.

My friend, grandpa who has been waiting for Levi, didn't know what to do. The kids weren't asking for his input. Didn't call to think through the decision about whether to go or not. So he wasn't sure whether to say anything...

I told him to risk it.

I told him our adult sons allow me about one teaspoon of advice a year, but I told my friend to risk it. To call his kids. To tell them he loves them. And offer whatever word he thinks they need to hear before they would head to Indy...and get on that plane...or not. Sometimes love means taking the risk to speak the truth even if you aren't sure the ones you love will hear it.

Why does God keep irritating us with the truth?

Because God loves us.

Jesus as Living Truth.

God's truth becomes real in Jesus. When Jesus appears on the earth we come face to face with the truth of God in a way that free us. If you want to know what truth looks like, look at Jesus. Study Jesus. Listen to Jesus. Follow Jesus.

He's the truth -the living truth- that can set us free.

The opening words of the Gospel of John are some of the most beautiful words in the whole world. John 1:10-12 says this: *He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world didn't even notice. He came to his own people, but they didn't want him. But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed to and would do what he said, he made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves.*

To live in truth, to be free, is to know him. Trust that he is who he claims to be.

Jesus. Son of God. Good Shepherd. Living Bread. Living Water. Savior. Lord.

We are at a point where pretending won't do. Politeness won't do. Not any more. We need truth...God's truth.

Only the truth will do.

As hard as that may be for you to hear...

What is God saying?

Will we listen...

Will we be different?