



NOT YOUR AVERAGE JOE PART IV: TO TELL THE TRUTH

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Federal Way, WA
September 19, 2004*

I hope you're enjoying this study in the life of Joseph. I'd encourage you to go back and read through his whole life in one sitting sometime, just to get a sense of the big picture. We'll spend this morning and next week looking at two more occasions in his life before we say good bye to him and begin a new series. Just to recap a bit, we've looked at his calling, we looked at his sense of purpose in making decisions and we've looked at how he dealt with temptations.

We mentioned last week that doing the right thing doesn't always feel good, and we pick up this morning with Joseph in jail. He's there because of how he responded to the advances of Potiphar's wife. But even still, God was with him and speaking to him, as we'll see in the story.

Genesis 40

Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard assigned them to Joseph, and he attended them.

After they had been in custody for some time, each of the two men — the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were being held in prison — had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own.

When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. So he asked Pharaoh's officials who were in custody with him in his master's house, "Why are your faces so sad today?"

"We both had dreams," they answered, "but there is no one to interpret them."

Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams."

So the chief cupbearer told Joseph his dream. He said to him, "In my dream I saw a vine in front of me, and on the vine were three branches. As soon as it budded, it blossomed, and its clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup and put the cup in his hand."

"This is what it means," Joseph said to him. "The three branches are three days. Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position, and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon."

When the chief baker saw that Joseph had given a favorable interpretation, he said to Joseph, "I too had a dream: On my head were three baskets of bread. In the top basket were all kinds of baked goods for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head."

"This is what it means," Joseph said. "The three baskets are three days. Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat away your flesh."

Now the third day was Pharaoh's birthday, and he gave a feast for all his officials. He lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker in the presence of his officials: He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, so that he once again put the cup into Pharaoh's hand, but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had said to them in his interpretation.

The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.

Joseph just can't get a break. First he's sold into slavery, then he's accused of attempted rape, then he's thrown in jail, then he has to tell someone they're going to die. And then he's forgotten.

It's this time while he's in jail that I'd like to look at this morning, because it deals with a topic that's relevant for all of us: truth telling. By truth telling, I don't just mean not lying. One of our core values that we talk about here at New Day is that authenticity rules the day. We want to be transparent people and not just putting on fake smiles when we come to church and pretending we've got it all together. Truth telling is foundational to that. It's a willingness to be completely honest with reality.

That sounds so refreshing and freeing – to be able to just say what we think and how we feel. One of the main reasons people give for not going to church is that they think everyone there is hypocritical. I think we could all agree that we want to be the opposite of that.

But speaking truth has a terrifying side to it as well, because it often means saying something that is hard for the other person to hear. Look at what Joseph had to say to the baker: "You're going to die in 3 days." Who wants to be in that kind of role? Who wants to put themselves in such an uncomfortable position?

I've had to learn a lot about truth telling in my role here. We've talked about it being the church's birthday, and how we're just a year old, which means I'm equally new at being a pastor. I've had to figure things out as we grow, and one thing that has become painfully clear is how far I have to go in this department.

I don't know that anyone is particularly fond of confrontation, but everybody knows that it isn't my strong suit. I'm Mr. Diplomatic. Even the name Jeffrey means peacemaker. It's become a bit of a joke that when someone asks me for my opinion, I'll usually say something like, "Well there's a couple different ways you could look at that."

But as a pastor, I've had to learn to be more direct. Sometimes I've had to say some pretty straightforward things, either in sermons or to various individuals. In fact, there are a few of you here this morning who could share stories with the group about how much I need to learn in this area, because you've seen me in action!

A couple weeks ago, I received a form letter from an official with the denomination we belong to. I receive these periodically, and they're usually an appeal to pastors about one ministry or another. Sometimes I read them, sometimes I don't. They rarely catch my attention. But in this case, the letter made me mad. I thought the way something was said was completely inappropriate and manipulative, and it felt totally out of line to me.

You've probably never seen me very worked up. I only have a few hot buttons that get me going. Let's just say I was really glad I had to mow the lawn right after I got the letter, because it gave me a chance to work off a little steam.

The letter came from someone I've never met and had never talked to, but I knew that I needed to confront him and express what I felt. My heart was pounding like crazy when I got his voice on the phone. I had to catch my breath before I launched into my speech. I didn't yell or scream, but I managed to say pretty directly why I felt the letter was wrong.

Things ended up fine, and we had a good talk. But why is it those conversations are so hard – even with someone we don't know? One reason is that being NICE is considered a supreme Christian virtue. We don't want to do anything that would possibly be offensive or hurtful. So we ignore issues, we skirt around problems in order to not rock the boat.

Valuing niceness over truth can result in leaders with obvious character flaws and moral failings continuing unchecked in the church because nobody wants to confront them. Valuing niceness over truth can mean people with no gifting or skills in a certain area keep on serving there because no one wants to hurt their feelings. I've been in churches that valued niceness where Sunday morning services were polite, but unspoken hurts swept under the rug were festering below the surface.

It's certainly admirable to be considerate, but we can't do so at the expense of truth. We don't need to be like a bull in a china shop, but we don't need to walk on egg shells either.

That's what I like about Joseph's actions in this story. Here was someone who had a tough message to share, and he did it very well. The author doesn't make a big deal about it or draw attention to what's going on, but there are a number of principles in Joseph's situation that apply directly to us.

To help them stick in our minds, I'm using the word SPEAK as an acronym for the lessons I see in Joseph.

1. S – START WITH RELATIONSHIP

Let's look again at where things began:

Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard assigned them to Joseph, and he attended them.

Joseph shared some common ground with the two officials. They had all offended their masters, and they were all in prison together. Joseph could identify with their plight.

Joseph also had the job of caring for the cupbearer and baker. He provided for them and looked after them. We know from previous chapters that whatever Joseph did, he did well. You can see that in his conversation. He immediately picked up on the fact that they weren't doing well after their dreams and he said, "Why are your faces so sad today?"

So Joseph had a point of identification and a basis of caring. These are two key starting points for truth telling. Before saying anything, it is vital that we can identify with the person we're talking to. Do we have a good understanding of what it's like to be in their shoes? Do we know how our words will sound and feel to them? And secondly, we genuinely care about them.

That often goes against our notion of truth-telling, because we define truth-telling almost like fault finding. Jim Cymbala says this:

Many of us feel that discerning the faults of others is a sign of our spirituality. Nothing could be further from the truth. The real mark of Christlikeness is to be stirred in our hearts by what others are going through.

If the person listening to me can't relate to me, they won't take me seriously. And if I don't have any love for them in sharing my message, it will come across harsh and cold and unfeeling.

Karin saw a car this week covered with bumper stickers shouting messages like "BELIEVE ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AND YE SHALL BE SAVED." There's

nothing wrong with that message, but on a car, it is being shouted without any context of relationship, so it feels very preachy. It's like sitting behind a wall and yelling through a bullhorn at people on the other side. You can communicate the words that way, but no sense of caring.

Ephesians 4:15

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

It was Christ who modeled this perfectly. God became human to identify with us. He demonstrated his love for us on the cross – all to communicate the truth of God's desire to restore a relationship with us and deal with sin. The dealing with sin was the hard message – it hurts to give it up and it's costly to break free from it. But God didn't say it in a heavy handed way – he did it by living among us and feeling the weight of sin himself and showing ultimately how much he loved us.

Starting with relationship means first making sure we can identify with the other person and that part of our motivation in sharing something with them is because we care about them enough to do it.

2. P – POINT TO THE SOURCE

Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams."

Joseph didn't have some secret knowledge of the future. He knew that the interpretations came from God.

If I've got a really good compass that always points to true north, that's great. But I can't say that the compass is what made north north. The compass is totally dependent on the magnetic poles of the earth to work properly.

I've got news for you: You may have a good internal compass for truth, but you're not the fountain of wisdom. Neither am I. God is the source of truth.

That means we must speak truth with humility and great care. People who take on the role of truth tellers often see themselves as infallible and forget that it isn't their own message they are sharing.

If it's God's truth and not just our own opinion, if I'm not the one who has ownership, that should free me from the personal emotion attached to what I say. We can feel passionate about it, but we're not the ones who have a stake in how it's communicated – God is.

We're the messengers, not the authors of the message, and we're not to be judgmental in our delivery. In truth telling our job is to remember that interpretations belong to God, and point to the source.

I'm not saying to claim "God told me to tell you this" when you have to speak to someone. That's presumptive, especially if they haven't been getting anything close to the same message from him. But if you have it clear in your own mind that you're trying to share a word from him and not just out of your own perspective, then it won't need to be such a personal kind of confrontation. You're one step removed from the situation. And if there is a sharp disagreement, you can say, "You know what? Let's ask God to help us make sense of this," because he's the source of all wisdom.

3. E – EMBRACE THE COLLABORATION

Truth came to the baker and the cupbearer in two parts – first in the dream, then the interpretation. It's worth noting that Joseph didn't get the whole picture on his own.

Years ago, there was a movie with Holly Hunter and Richard Dreyfus. He played her husband who had died, but who now as a ghost was trying to communicate with her. She couldn't hear him, though. But he found this crazy bum who seemed to catch words and phrases he would say, who could then pass them on to Holly. The only trouble was, he didn't usually catch all the words, and so the messages he was passing on were garbled and incomplete.

That to me is a great picture of God's speaking through us. Yes, we hear him, and he often gives us messages to share with other people. But we don't often catch all the words, and our retelling gets a bit jumbled.

Fortunately, neither you nor I are God's only mouthpiece. Scripture tells us that each believer has been given the Spirit of God. When you put your faith in Christ, he puts his Spirit in your heart.

Scripture also says this:

John 16:13

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.

So God is communicating his truth to me. But it isn't like he's only talking to me. He's talking to you as well. And none of us has perfect hearing.

I might have a little corner OF God's truth, but I don't have a corner ON God's truth. When we go to share our important concerns with somebody and let them know the truth they really need to hear, we have to keep in mind that God is also speaking directly to them. We are not his sole agent in their life.

They may desperately need what we have to share – the baker and cupbearer couldn't make sense of the dreams that had been revealed to them. They needed Joseph.

Your insights may be just what somebody is needing to hear. If you're feeling something strongly and holding back on sharing it, you might be depriving them of an important piece for their growth. We just need to remember that getting at truth is a collaborative process – not a solo act.

4. A – AIM FOR THE TARGET

When it came time for Joseph to interpret the baker's dream, the baker was expecting good news, and Joseph probably felt terrible giving him such devastating news. But Joseph cut to the chase and didn't waste time.

That's hard to do. We fear reactions and consequences, so we pull back from being direct. There was once someone who worked in my department that I knew was on shaky ground with my boss. I really dreaded talking to her about it, because I was afraid it was going to damage our working relationship. Finally when I did tell her, she wished I had said something a long time ago. In fact, she was upset with me for NOT telling her plainly much sooner. There's nothing to be gained by waiting to tell the truth.

It wouldn't have done the baker any good if Joseph had softened the blow. By hearing it directly, he could begin to process it immediately and be prepared in some way for what was to come. That may not sound like a benefit, but it was better than living with the unknown. Knowing what was coming gave him time to ask himself the hard questions about his life before he died.

Joseph was direct and to the point. Let's say you're the baker and I'm Joseph. Imagine that instead of coming to you, I instead went over to the butler. "Oh boy. Can you believe that baker's dream? This is really too bad. This guy's gonna die. I wonder what he did to make Pharaoh so mad. Must have been bad. His life is such a mess."

It's easy to talk directly about a problem to the wrong person. Truth telling means we not only say the right things, we say them to the right people. It takes a great deal of restraint to not talk around someone. We need to help each other with that. If someone starts talking to you about their issue with someone else, stop them in mid-sentence and say, "You know what? You should talk to him or her about that." You can even offer to go with the other person for moral support. Let's commit ourselves to aiming for the right target.

5. K – KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF

When Joseph gave the cupbearer his interpretation, he was hoping for different results.

"This is what it means," Joseph said to him. "The three branches are three days. Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position, and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to

Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon."

Joseph was completely forgotten. It was a sad reminder that we have no control over what people do with what we tell them.

But that's okay. Once we've communicated our truth, we are not responsible for managing someone's reaction to it.

In that conversation I mentioned at the beginning, I was not satisfied with the response I got from the denominational official. Essentially, it felt like his apology was more like, "I'm sorry you felt offended." I got no sense that he understood me well or would do anything differently the next time, and I started to try to press him for more. When I did that, things started to get tense between us, and I knew I was overstepping my bounds. When I got off the phone, I told Karin, "I think it went pretty well until I started trying to control his reaction."

It's the job of the Holy Spirit to bring conviction and to use the truth. Our job is just to be faithful in what we feel he's asked us to say, then keep our hands off and let him take it from there. We aren't responsible for the effectiveness of what we say – only for the telling itself.

So we start from the start – loving and identifying with the other person. We point to the source – it's God's truth not ours. We embrace the collaboration, realizing we jointly understand truth. We aim for the target, being direct and talking to the right people. And we keep our hands off, trusting God to do his will with what we've said.

Jesus said

John 8:32

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Genuine honesty takes courage. Truth-telling is hard work. But the results can be powerful. When we speak it, it changes lives. When we hear it, it changes us. Speaking the truth in love, we grow toward Christ.

What truth has God laid on your heart this morning? What is he wanting you to share? And what is he trying to say to you through someone else? Are we willing to be people who can speak boldly for him and listen for his voice through what others are saying? Let's be part of his agenda to set people free.