



TO TELL THE TRUTH

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
April 29, 2007*

There was an elderly couple that was having trouble remembering things. So they went to see the doctor. He didn't think it was anything to worry about, but recommended they start using sticky notes to remind themselves about anything they felt was important. They thought that was a great idea, and they went home feeling relieved.

When they arrived, the wife said, "I feel like having a bowl of ice cream to celebrate." Her husband said, "I'll go get it for you." She asked him, "Do you think you should make yourself a note so you remember?"

"Don't be silly," he said, a little insulted. "I think I can remember a bowl of ice cream."

"Yeah, but I want some strawberries on it, too" said his wife. "Maybe you should write that down."

"No problem. I can remember a bowl of ice cream with strawberries. I don't need a note."

"One more thing – could you put some whip cream on it too? Oh never mind – you'd definitely need to write that down."

"No, no. I got it. A bowl of ice cream. Strawberries. Whip cream. I'll be right back."

So, the husband went downstairs to the kitchen. His wife could hear him banging around with pots and pans that didn't sound anything like getting ice cream out of the freezer.

Finally, he came back. In his hand was a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon. He handed it to her. She looked at it for a minute, then said, "Where's the toast?"

We all could use a little help remembering. This sermon series is our sticky note series – Messages to help remind us who we are and what we're all about. This is the stuff that's too important to forget, so we're writing it down and are trying to burn it in our minds. If you're visiting with us this morning, we're in the middle of an 8 week trip through New Day's vision and values. We're reconnecting with what makes us tick. If you didn't happen to get a bookmark last week with all the values listed on it, we have a few more available today.

Last week we looked at Value #1, Worship is central. We said that our primary job is focusing our attention on God, waking up to who he is. That plays out not just in our worship services, but in our day to day existence as well.

This morning we're talking about our second major core value, which is: **Truth must be well told.**

This value might be a little less expected than one about worship. It's a somewhat unusual value for a church to highlight. I have to admit, I stole the idea from a non-church setting.

It actually came from the slogan "Truth Well Told," used by McCann-Erickson, a giant international advertising agency. There's something slightly ironic about an ad agency using a phrase with the word truth in it to describe themselves. But I've liked that ever since I first heard it. And with my background in advertising, it felt somehow fitting to be able to steal that phrase and put it to a better use.

Because I think it is exactly the right motto for a church. Christians make the extraordinary claim to know the most important truth in the universe – that God loves us, that life has meaning and that there's life after this life – incredible truth, and we have an enormous responsibility to share it well. At the same time, I realize when I talk about it, I'm opening myself up for some major criticism. I have my notes from the messages I preached on our core values back in 2003, so I went back to review the "truth well told" sermon. And I cringed when I read it, because I felt like I didn't tell it well at all.

Doing justice to the gospel is not an easy task. I'm so glad Paul pointed out that we have this treasure in jars of clay. We're trying to contain something, to communicate something that we're not even capable of. This is going to be one of those values we pursue wholeheartedly but never fully achieve.

Even so, I think it is tremendously important. When Paul was nearing the end of his life, he wrote one last letter to his young protégé, Timothy. Listen to what he told him:

2 Timothy 4:1-5

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage -- with great patience and careful instruction.

You can hear the intensity and the urgency in his words. This is the main thing, Timothy. Get it right. Tell it well. But then he follows it up with this next observation:

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn

aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

In other words, “Tell the truth well, but don’t expect to be heard.” Paul said a time will come when people aren’t all that interested in truth.

I think we’re living in a time like Paul was talking about. Finding truth isn’t the highest priority for most people, or at least truth in the way it has traditionally been defined.

Scholars generally agree we’re in the middle of a major cultural shift right now. We’re moving from what they called the modern era into one called the postmodern era. In the modern era, which lasted about 500 years, there was this strong belief in the idea of progress, human reasoning skills. We could use the scientific process to solve all the mysteries of the universe. There was a hope that mankind was working toward a great future where we would have the answers to all the problems in the world. Everything seemed to be on one giant track moving forward.

Then came the 20th century. Two World Wars shocked people into the realization that humanity wasn’t moving toward a perfect society. Science and reason were unable to answer many of the most pressing questions. The universe was turning out to be much more complex than anyone dreamed. Progress had its limits. It changed the cultural landscape. People today view the world very differently than they did 100 years ago. There’s more anxiety about the future and less certainty in any truth being universal.

You don’t have to know the word postmodern to recognize how things have changed. People have lost faith in any kind of absolutes. Whether or not an idea is true doesn’t matter as much to people as whether or not it works for them.

People also define truth differently: It’s no longer an objective, rational summary of the facts. It’s subjective, based on my experience and point of view, rather than anything outside me.

I’ll give you an example. I once sat and talked with a friend who was making a choice that clearly went against what the Bible had to say, but he felt Jesus approved of his actions. When I asked him how he knew that, he said, “I can just feel it in my heart.” For him, truth wasn’t measured by logic or rational evaluation of the evidence or even by what the Bible claims, but by how related to something personally. People will often say things like, “What’s true for you may not be true for me.” It’s all subjective.

That may sound bleak, but I think we’re living in one of the most exciting times to be a Christian, and I’ll tell you why: There are many things about the 21st century that are like the first century. People are more open to spirituality in general. We have this stew of ideas living side by side much like Rome did back in Paul’s day. And it opens up huge opportunities for sharing the message of Jesus. But it means learning to retell it in new ways. Methods of communicating truth that worked in modern culture are now not as effective. A list of logical evidence for Jesus’ resurrection or a rational defense of how

we got the Bible may be just as true as ever, but they're no longer the primary tools that will convince the average person to put their faith in Christ. That's just not how most people think today.

So we get to peel away the layers of habit and tradition to rediscover what's underneath. Think of a big boat sailing through the water. As it goes along, it picks up barnacles, until the entire hull is encrusted with them. It looks like the boat is actually made of barnacles. But it isn't. They need to be scraped away.

That's how it is with the Christian message. As it sails through each era, it picks up the trappings of that era until it's almost unrecognizable and looks like it is completely one with those trappings. Now is our chance to do some scraping, to free up the truth and see how it will intersect with a new era and a new generation. **Truth transcends culture.** The gospel was around long before the modern way of thinking. We have a chance in our day to reconnect with bedrock truth. That's exciting.

But it can also feel like a lot of pressure. If we don't get it right people won't listen. That's why I like it that Paul warned Timothy that people weren't going to listen anyway. Truth is to be well told in spite of how people receive it. Do we want to remove as many objections as possible? Absolutely. Do we want to speak in the language people are using today? Of course. But even then, people will only listen to what they want to hear.

Telling truth well isn't all about hoping it will get us an audience. We seek to tell truth well because that's what the truth deserves. Something this important deserves nothing less than our full energies and resources.

But what does that mean? What does it look like to tell truth well? To unpack this value a bit more, I'd like to look at another passage from Paul:

Colossians 4:2-6

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

If we're going to discuss telling truth well, we probably first need to spend a moment clarifying what we mean by truth. What exactly is it we are wanting to communicate? We aren't talking about a list of facts or statements that happen to be true. We're talking about truth with a capital T, the very core of reality.

Truth is a person It's Jesus. Paul sums it up as "the mystery of Christ." How could the God of the entire universe focus himself in one human being to save all humanity? That's the mystery, but it's also the truth. The person and work of Jesus in history are the essence of truth. That's what we're committed to.

By association that means we're committed to the Bible, because this is the book that bears witness to the Truth. We treasure it and respect it and treat it as the authority on Truth, because it is THE primary written record we have of God's saving activity in the world. It's the keeper of the story. What that means for us as a church is that we let the Bible serve as the filter for understanding our world – not the other way around. We don't interpret the Bible's message for a new age – we interpret the new age in light of what the Bible has to say.

We may have to wrestle with it. We may not like all it has to say. It may make us uncomfortable at times. But isn't that the role of truth? I can't trust myself to always just automatically have good instincts for truth. I will always have some form of bias. I need something outside of me to be the standard, something that resists my attempts to manipulate it or tone it down or revise it. Scripture is described as the breath of God. It's more than words on a page. It has life-giving, life-changing power in it.

Paul talks about 3 ways truth is communicated. The first is

Proclamation

When I hear the word proclamation, I think of the old town criers, reading off the latest royal decree. They were like the original newspapers, walking the streets of a town and sharing important messages. Believe it or not, there are still town criers today, and they have world championship competitions. If you're wanting to win it, one key criteria is volume – how well your message can be heard above the crowd.

When we think about proclamation in the church, it's our attempts to lift the message up above the roar of the crowd. It's giving the truth its own separate spot where it can be heard.

Romans 10:17

Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

The message has to be put out there again and again and again because that's what sparks faith. We try to create settings where the gospel is given a platform in a specific way, whether through sermons or classes or Bible studies or events. God says when his word goes out, it never comes back to him empty handed. Somehow, when it is proclaimed, it grabs ahold of people like nothing else.

Paul says that's not the only form of truth telling we need to be concerned about, though. The second mode is what I would call

Demonstration

Paul told Timothy:

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

The King James version had it a little closer to the original Greek. Instead of saying “make the most of the opportunity,” it translates it as “redeeming the time.” The concept is that we buy back time so as not to lose a minute of it.

I used to work with a woman from Arizona. Her years in Phoenix had made her extremely water conservation conscious. In Arizona she had found all kinds of ways to reduce her water use and reclaim little bits of water. If she was running water to wash her hands in the sink, she wouldn't just let it go down the drain, like I do. She would use that water to water her plants. She redeemed every little bit of water she could, because living in a desert setting, she viewed water as precious.

We need to have a conservation mindset in our time with people. Time is precious. We don't know how much we've got. We want each interaction we have to reflect the love of Jesus.

The way Paul tells Timothy to do that is to pay attention to how he acts. This is why this value of telling truth well is for the whole church, because truth isn't just the responsibility of the preacher. Truth is more than a Powerpoint presentation. It has to be seen in a lifestyle. It has to be lived out in a believable way that shows what kind of difference it makes.

This is especially important in our day. That's how people evaluate whether or not something is for real. Author Rick Richardson says, “Truth as philosophical or conceptual, truth divorced from feeling and action, is meaningless to postmodern people.”

The whole nature of the message of the gospel is that God took on a body. So it makes complete sense that for us to continue to communicate that truth, we have to give it hands and feet. Our individual lives need to look like the truth, because that's how God has chosen to express it.

Ronald Rolheiser tells a story about a little 4 year old girl who woke up scared in the night because her room was so dark. She was convinced there were monsters she couldn't see. So she ran down the hall to her parents' room. Her mom calmed her down, took her by the hand and led her back to her room. She tucked her in and turned on a little night light. Then she told her daughter, “You know, God is always right here with you.”

The little girl said, “I know God is here. I just needed somebody with skin on.”

We all need people with skin on to grasp the truth. That's why we have each other at New Day.

Another way Paul says truth is communicated is through

Conversation

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

This is separate from the formal “proclamation” kind of speech we talked about earlier. Not everybody has the opportunity to stand up and tell a whole crowd about Jesus, but everybody has conversations on an everyday basis.

You can see just how thoroughly Paul wants the truth to take over. Even our casual, informal comments have the opportunity to be full of grace. We say thousands of words every day. I’m sure a few of them are salty, but is it the kind of salty Paul had in mind?

Preachers have had a heyday with the salt analogy. They talk about how salt is a preservative. They say it adds flavor. But I think there’s another connection in there as well. We tend to eat a lot of pizza at our house. And if it’s a good, salty pepperoni, I can predict what will happen a couple hours after dinner: We’ll all be chugging down the water because we’re so thirsty.

Salt produces thirst. Our conversations should create a thirst for truth in other people’s minds. Sometimes when we think about bringing up Jesus in a conversation, we feel pressure to make a big deal about it. We can make it into a scary prospect for us, not to mention the other person. But that pressure goes away when we think instead of filling our words with enough taste of grace that people will become thirsty for more. Rebecca Pippert describes it by saying truth should be “exposed” rather than “imposed”.

So we’re committed to the truth, we have multiple ways of sharing it. Our value also says that we want to tell it well. What’s involved in telling it well?

There are any number of ways to define that, but I try to keep in mind three C words. You’ll find them on your bookmarks: Carefully, clearly and creatively. The first is

Carefully

Hebrews 4:12-13

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Have you ever seen in movies where a sword slices through a single hair because it’s so sharp? You don’t mess around with them or you’ll cause some serious damage.

The word of God is a sword and it’s called that for a reason. It cuts. We have to be careful with it. That’s why Paul told Timothy,

2 Timothy 2:15-16

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

The words “correctly handles” could more accurately be translated as “cuts cleanly” or “rightly divides” as the older translations used to say. We have to learn how to wield Scripture skillfully, or we can end up causing a lot of damage.

Too many churches that claim they are committed to the Bible aren’t equally committed to handling it with care. I’ve heard far too many sermons where people were being bullied in the name of truth.

This was WASL week in a lot of schools. There was some major pre-test stress around our house. I was talking with Vince Blauser about strategies kids have for test taking and he said he always encourages students to use a five word rule. “I know I’m right because...” It’s a little way of stopping and checking your work to make sure it has some solid thinking behind it.

We won’t always get it right at New Day, but hopefully we will always check our work. Hopefully we can stop and ask ourselves how we know we’re right. Have we examined Scripture thoroughly? Are we listening to the Holy Spirit? Are we sure we’re not trying to make the Bible say what we want it to say? Telling truth well means telling it carefully.

It also means trying to tell it

Clearly

That was Paul’s request to Timothy: Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. The gospel isn’t complicated, but it’s sure easy to make it that way.

Author York Moore says, “For all its simplicity and power, the gospel is one of the most elusive and misrepresented messages of the Christian faith.” He speaks from personal experience. He became a Christian as a college student in Michigan. He was so excited about his new faith that he talked about it all the time to people on campus, especially a guy named Chris that he worked with in the school library.

York liked Bible prophecy and he was always telling Chris about all these important truths he was finding out. But he couldn’t figure out why Chris hadn’t decided to become a Christian. Then he felt like the Holy Spirit said to him, “Why don’t you try sharing the gospel with him?”

So York took Chris to dinner. He explained that God loves us, but there’s a problem. He told him how we’re all soul sick with sin. All the bad things people do are symptoms of the disease. But we like choosing the bad things, which leads us to being separated from

God. That leads to death and eventual judgment by God. God is holy and perfect, and even if he wanted to forgive us, he had to judge us because he's holy and we're not.

All the while, York keeps checking in to make sure Chris understands, which he says he does. So York continued, telling Chris about God's solution. Since God loves us so deeply, he sent his Son Jesus to earth. He was sinless and never made the bad choices we do. His dying on the cross provided the antibiotic to cure our soul disease. God could reverse the effects of sin in our life. At the same time, he took that punishment of death as our substitute.

But he didn't stay dead. He rose again, giving us the hope of life after death, and the power to live differently today. But if we're going to receive that from him, we have to respond to him. We have to recognize our sin disease, reconsider our own situation. We have to turn our lives over to God, acknowledging our sin and asking his forgiveness. Then he said, "So my question to you, Chris is this: Are you ready to give control over to God and admit your sin? Do you want to become a follower of Jesus?"

Here's what Chris said. "I wondered when you would get around to this. For these past few months, I've noticed a difference in you. You've been like a completely different person. But when you shared all that interesting stuff in our conversations, I never knew what the main point was. You would just talk and talk and it was all great, but I didn't see how it related to me. Now I see. This message makes sense. Of course I want to become a Christian."

York went on to write, "People often wonder why I spend so much time explaining the gospel to churchgoing, professing Christians. It's because these are often the people who have never heard or understood the gospel."

Is the gospel clear in your own head? Are you able to share it in a way that other people can understand? If it's fuzzy in your mind, it will no doubt sound fuzzy to other people. We need to know the truth clearly for ourselves so we in turn can communicate it clearly and effectively.

Finally, I believe truth is well told when it is communicated

Creatively

I once heard a pastor say that if God's mercies are new every morning, what we say should be new every morning. We can't rely on the same tired ways of saying things that we have in the past.

Paul was such a great example of this. When he went to visit Athens, he looked around at all the idols and altars everywhere and it really bothered him. Nobody seemed interested in the true God. But then he saw an altar with the inscription TO AN UNKNOWN GOD, and that became his in. He used that to say, "I know this unknown

God you're talking about." He then proceeded to explain about Jesus to the people of Athens, and he incorporated sayings from their own poets.

It was creative. He didn't change the message, but he put it in the language and context that people could understand.

That's the challenge – to find ways of connecting with people in our postmodern world. New times call for new vocabulary and imagery that can convey the ancient truth in powerful and meaningful ways for the next generation.

It's not a nameless, faceless generation – it's individual people, your friends and family, my friends and family. Who do you know that's needing to hear the truth of the gospel, told well?

Maybe you've checked out during this sermon. Maybe you believe, but you have never told anybody about Jesus, and you think you probably never will. For you, faith is very private and you don't want to pressure anyone with it. If that's you this morning, I want to point you back to Timothy. Paul told Timothy "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction."

Are you "in season"? Do the people who are closest to you know that you have faith? Are you an encouragement to your spouse? Do you connect with your children with patience? Does the word of God have a central spot in your home?

Truth can be told best with family, but it's also the hardest place to do it because they're always with us. They see the worst and we think we can get away with it because they can't leave.

Christian authors Gordon and Gail MacDonald vowed that they would never pretend to be in public what they weren't in the privacy of their own home. The challenge this morning is to get "in season" in your own home. Risk the awkwardness of your children hearing you pray out loud for the first time. Put yourself on the line and let your spouse know that you're praying for them. Pick up your Bible and ask the Lord to help you be kind to the people you live with. This is humbling work that takes courage. But it's the good, salty stuff God calls us to.

I'd like to lead you in a prayer about telling truth well in your own life:

Pray that God will show you where your lifestyle could be more consistent with the truth and what steps you need to take in your own home.

Pray that God will put someone on your heart that needs the hope of Jesus.

Pray that God will give you courage and opportunity to have a conversation with them that will leave them thirsty for more truth.

Pray that God will give you clear, creative thinking about how to share his truth.

Maybe you feel like Chris from that story this morning and you've had a new sense of clarity today. You've known about Jesus before, but now you're ready to invite him into your own world in a new way, to start a one on one relationship with him. If you're wanting that this morning, will you just slip your hand up so I can pray for you?

I'm going to pray a prayer you can pray along with me in your own heart:

Jesus, I believe you died and rose again – not just for the world, but for me. I want and need your forgiveness. I want to change. Will you come into my life and give me the power to start fresh.