



TO TELL THE TRUTH

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When I think about my childhood, there's one TV commercial that stands out. Granted, there weren't that many to pick from back in those days, but this one was a good one. It was for Tootsie Pops. Remember it? A boy with a sucker goes up to an owl and says, "Mr. Owl, how many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop?" The owl says, "Let's see. A one...a two...a three..." He then gobbles up the whole sucker and says, "Three. Three licks."

Owls are always thought to be pretty wise, and I have to say, I do like the way Mr. Owl thinks. How many licks does it take? As few as possible. The bare minimum to get you to the good part.

How many values does it take to get to who New Day is? A one...a two...a seven. Seven values. That's the answer. Not because they're the only ones we have: we could go on all day listing things we believe in. But the seven we've identified as core values are the bare minimum to help us get to the good stuff. They keep us centered and focused on Jesus.

We're in our second week of looking at these values close up. As a reminder, here they are again:

1. Worship is central.
2. Truth must be well-told.
3. The church is a mission outpost.
4. Every Christian is a minister.
5. Authenticity rules the day.
6. The church must lead the way in love & reconciliation.
7. The Who question outranks the How question.

Last week we looked at Value #1, Worship is central. That's our purpose as the people of God – to recognize and enjoy him. This morning we're talking about our second major core value, which is: **Truth must be well told.**

I don't know if it's right for a church to steal a value, but we weren't the ones who came up with this one. We didn't steal it from another church, though: it came from the business world. For many years, the giant international advertising agency McCann-Erickson had the slogan "Truth Well Told," as a trademark. There's something ironic

about an ad agency using a phrase with the word truth in it to describe what they do. But I've liked it ever since I first heard it. And given my many years in advertising, it felt very gratifying to be able to reclaim that phrase and put it to a better use.

Because I think it is exactly the right value for a church. We've got way better reasons to hold on to it than an ad agency does. As Christians, we make the extraordinary claim to know THE most important truth in the universe – that God loves us, that Jesus came and died for us and that there is hope and life and joy in knowing him. There's no better truth to tell well.

But throughout history, the church hasn't always told it well at all. In fact sometimes you wish God would have just stepped in and told Christians, "Shut up and sit down. You're not helping." There have been too many atrocities committed in the name of God, horrible things that have no doubt driven countless people further from God.

I feel sick when I read stories about priests who have totally abused their authority. It makes me angry when I flip on the TV and see a televangelist twisting Scripture to get people to send him money. I get frustrated when I sit and hear a sermon that has no grace in it and never points to Jesus. I feel sad when I go to a wedding and hear canned words that miss the chance to speak truth into the most important day of someone's life. It drives me crazy when Christians end up just talking to themselves in language that make it impossible for any outsider to get a handle on the message. In many ways this value that truth must be well told was born out of seeing a shortage of well-told truth and feeling it was so wrong.

It's a whole lot easier to shake your head and criticize what you see in other people than it is to actually be any different. Good old Philip Yancey said, "When I stood outside the church, looking in, I found much to criticize...I have much more sympathy for the church's failures now that I am contributing to them."

Telling truth well is HARD. And preaching on it is even worse. It's like preaching on what a good sermon should be. This is setting myself up for disaster! Sometimes I go back and look at old messages I've preached and I want to just roll my eyes at myself, because in hindsight, I say, "that was not truth well told."

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." It is hard to tell truth well.

But the other reason it's hard to speak about this value is because it is so easy to make it all about us. As if we've got to get the words or the tone just right or we'll ruin everything. That quickly turns a love of truth into a burden that's too much for anyone to bear. So because this territory is fraught with many a peril, I'd like to just pause and ask for God's leading.

This is a value we have to strive for, but hold loosely. I like what Paul had to say to 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.

He says “Do your best. Work at it. Give it your all.” Clearly, this task was just as difficult for them as it is for us. It has always taken practice and intentional effort.

But then Paul talks about correctly handling the word of truth. A more literal translation of the Greek would be to “cut cleanly.” Or “rightly divide” as some older translations put it. Scripture is referred to as a sword, and I think the analogy can help us.

Have you ever seen a Scottish Claymore sword like they used in Braveheart? They’re super long and heavy and require two hands. Both edges are sharp. I picked one up once and thought, “There’s no way I could actually ever use this thing.” They’re so unwieldy and awkward. Now somebody untrained and uncoordinated like myself could be dangerous just trying to move the thing around. I could do some serious damage unintentionally. I would need training just on how to carry it correctly. I might not ever be able to learn how to use it in battle, but I could at the very least learn how not to impale somebody while I was cleaning it.

The same thing applies to handling the truth. We will never be perfect at saying just the right thing at just the right moment. But one thing we CAN do for sure is learn to be more careful with it and minimize the damage we do with it.

I had a friend in high school who used to be incredibly blunt and rude, and when it caused pain for people, she would just shrug her shoulders and say, “The truth hurts.” And sometimes it does, but that doesn’t mean we should use it like a hatchet.

We probably need to pause and talk about this word “truth”. That can mean a lot of things, especially in a society where everybody lives by their own truth. And some people would say we really can’t talk about it at all, because they don’t believe there is any universal truth. I don’t want to get derailed on a philosophical tangent this morning, but I will say this. The Christian concept of truth isn’t a list of facts or statements that happen to be true. What we’re talking about is Truth with a capital T, because Truth is a person – not a proposition. It’s Jesus. In John 14:6, Jesus said,

John 14:6

I am the way, the truth and the life.

There are all kinds of belief systems out there, with more or less valid support. And you can take away their leaders and still have the same faith. Buddhists don’t worship Buddha – they adhere to teachings that they can practice with or without him. Muslims don’t worship Mohammed and could keep their faith intact without him. Christianity rises or falls with Jesus. He is Truth, so how we think and feel and talk about him matters.

To explore this idea more, we're going to stick with Paul this morning, both for his teaching and his own life. If anyone ever embodied the value of telling truth well, it was him. He wrote to the church in Colossae and said:

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.

Paul said what he wanted to proclaim was “the mystery of Christ.” How could the God of the entire universe focus himself in one human being to save all humanity? How could the God who is spirit take on a body? How could the God who is eternal become something so temporary? And how could Christ’s death take away our sins? That’s the mystery, which is why it is so hard to tell well. There’s a lot there to unwrap. But it’s also THE truth. Who Jesus is and what he did while he was on Earth, what we call the Incarnation, is the bedrock of our faith. That’s what we’re committed to telling well.

We touched briefly last week on the difference it makes in our worship to have a personal God. So what difference does it make in our understanding of truth to say it is summed up in a person rather than a proposition?

One way it shows up is in how we think of the Bible. I’ve heard people refer to it as “God’s instruction book,” or “Life’s operating manual,” And there’s definitely plenty in it to guide our lives. But you can find rules to live by in lots of books.

The Bible is not unique because it gives good advice: It is unique because it is the book that bears witness to the Truth of the person Jesus. It’s the keeper of the story, and the way we read it is not to find new helpful tips, although they are there, but to find Christ on every page. Because that’s how he read it, and he’s the ultimate purpose the book was written to reveal.

How we talk about our faith, how we share it with other people, how we think about being a Christian all changes when we let it sink in that Truth is a person. And it changes how we decide what it means to tell truth well.

The reason I chose that passage from Colossians we just read was because in just a few verses, Paul walks through **the three main modes of telling truth** by the church: Proclamation, Demonstration and Conversation.

Proclamation

“Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should,” he says. Proclaiming is taking a stand for Christ in the public square. It is pointing to Jesus when everyone around you is looking a different direction.

Think about being at a busy airport. You’re waiting for your flight. It’s noisy and crowded. Then a voice crackles over the loudspeaker, saying, “Flight 167 to Seattle has been moved to Gate B17.” That’s pretty important for you to know. But sometimes the announcement is so soft you can barely hear it, or so quick that you miss it. Or you’re distracted by your newspaper and you’re not paying attention. You need the announcement to be loud enough and clear enough to cut through the clutter so you can know what you’re supposed to do. You need them to keep repeating it until you catch it.

What the gate attendant was doing was sending out a proclamation – publicly sharing vital information. And just like they help travelers at airports find their way, our proclamation of Christ is intended to help people redirect their lives to where they need to go. We’ve got to be loud enough to hear over all the other noise in the world, and we have to repeat it often.

We tend to associate proclamation with preaching, and that’s definitely a part of it. But sermons are only one way of proclaiming. We proclaim Jesus anytime we do or say something publicly to promote him. Confronting someone who’s being hateful. Taking a stand when you’re being asked to do something less than ethical. Giving a Christian perspective in the paper you write or present at school. Those Starbucks Bible Studies aren’t just for you – they’re saying something to the world. Paul said even the act of taking communion is a proclamation, because when we take it, we’re sending a message: “I believe in this.” Anywhere that we resist the current of where everyone else is going and hold our ground for Jesus, we are proclaiming him.

Because proclamation is so public, it opens us up to scrutiny. It commits us to the thing we’re proclaiming. When we say we believe something, we become responsible to act like it. And that’s the next form of truth telling Paul talks about – **demonstration**. He tells the Colossians:

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

In order for truth to be told well, it needs to be told with our lives. This is where it becomes clear that believing Truth is a person makes a difference in how we tell it. There’s an old quote that’s usually attributed to St. Francis. It says, “Preach the gospel. When necessary, use words.” The good news is most easily heard when it is delivered with loving action.

It’s like the story of the little girl who was going through a stage of being scared when she was alone in her room at night. So she called for her mom. And her mom said, “Sweetheart, you know God is always right here with you.” And the little girl replied, “I know he’s here. I just needed somebody with skin on.”

Honestly, nobody out there cares how many Bible verse you can quote. Nobody has ever been argued into believing. What people want to see is if you're living with integrity and humility and if you genuinely care about them. Because if you're there as a representative of Christ, if you're there to be Jesus with skin on, they will associate your life with your God.

Paul then takes the Colossians to the third mode of truth telling, which is in **conversation**. He says,

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

This is different from proclamation, because it is two way and relationship based. This is engaging people around us with truth.

Most of us don't feel confident or comfortable when it comes to injecting Jesus into the conversation. It feels pushy and makes us go all clammy inside. We don't know what to say, so we just don't go there.

Paul challenges us to think about the whole topic a little differently. First of all, he says, our words should be full of grace. Grace is forgiveness. Grace is being slow to anger. Grace is giving the benefit of the doubt. Grace is communicating that we see the other person as someone of value. Grace is really listening as if their words matter.

Dallas Willard says,

Silence and especially true listening are often the strongest testimony of our faith. A major problem for Christian evangelism is not getting people to talk, but to silence those who through their continuous chatter reveal a loveless heart devoid of confidence in God.

Conversation is both talking and listening, and both can communicate grace. And when we do, Paul says it's like somebody sprinkled the conversation with salt. Salt is one of the main basic flavors our taste buds can recognize. Somehow, when it is added to food, there's a chemical reaction of sorts that releases the true flavor locked inside the food. We don't just taste salt – we actually get more chicken or salmon or salad flavor when we add a little of the sodium chloride.

When our words are full of grace, the true flavor of the gospel begins to come through. You can taste what it's when it is well seasoned with compassion and love. That's what our message is all about

Those are the three main ways we communicate truth: Proclamation, Demonstration and Conversation. The question still remains: What does it look like to tell it well? Thankfully, we have more than Paul's words on the subject – we also have his example. One in particular stands out. Paul was on a mission trip when he ended up in Athens. He arrived before the rest of the group, and he had a little time for some sight seeing.

Acts 17:16-34

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. That's no exaggeration: The Greek historian Pausanias said there were more idols in Athens than in all the rest of Greece combined. An old proverb about Athens said there were more gods than people there.

This REALLY disturbed Paul. It drove him crazy to see the junk the masses of that city had bought into.

So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

Truth well told means...staying engaged.

This verse impressed me so much when I stopped to reread it. All this idolatry didn't shut Paul down. He went back to a group of fellow believers at the synagogue and talked with them about it. What do you guys think about what's going on in this town? How are you dealing with it? Then he headed out into the city on his own and started dialoguing with people on the street about their beliefs. He began to ask questions and wrap his mind around what was really going on.

Too often when we bump into something or someone who disagrees with our beliefs, one of two things happens: Either we get intimidated and shut down. We want to avoid conflict or think we can't make a difference, so we quit talking. OR -- we take the other route and overreact out of fear, going on the attack. There are plenty of Christians who take either approach: Fight or flight. But both avoidance and anger make it hard to tell the truth well, because both extremes distance us from others. Paul took a third option: He dove in and engaged with what was bothering him. Rather than just be offended or afraid, he took it on as a challenge. He kept his own bearings by staying connected with his believing community, and then fully immersed himself in the culture he wanted to reach with the truth.

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods."

They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

Truth well told means...looking for openings. As upset as Paul was by what he saw, he made a point of looking for the positive. He could affirm that the Athenians were religious people. They were spiritually hungry, and that was good. Rather than blast them away by correcting them, Paul affirmed what he could.

Then there was that altar to the unknown God. It was just one of probably thousands around town. Hardly one that stood out at all. But Paul seized on it, because it gave him a window into the world of Athens. It gave him a point of connection and a way to speak in a relatable way.

There are all kinds of openings with people that we easily miss in conversations. I had lunch with Tom Parks this week and we got talking about my sermon. Tom is someone has been learning a lot about telling truth well, and also getting some cool openings to share. I asked him if he'd be willing to come and be an in-person case study of what we're talking about.

Author Randy Newman says one of the easiest ways we miss these openings is with the "me too" syndrome. We try to identify with them and end up shutting them down.

For example, if someone comes up to you and says, "Yeah I've been meaning to get to church but my cousin just died of cancer and things have been kind of rough." You might be tempted to say something like, "My grandpa died of cancer, too. It was really hard but God really got me through it." Instead of making the person feel connected to you, they now feel shut down.

A better response would have been, "I'm so sorry. Were you close to your cousin? Tell me about him." When I don't turn the conversation around and make it all about me, I can pay more attention to points of connection and openings that the other person wants to share about.

Paul saw his opening and walked right into it:

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

Truth well told means...seeing past ourselves

This is one of my favorite sections. Paul quotes Epimenides and Aratus – two Greek poets from hundreds of years earlier who weren't even close to Christian. Paul could have shunned them as ungodly sources. But they had some good things to say, some truth that Paul could easily use to direct his listeners to the true God.

Augustine once wrote, "A person who is a good and true Christian should realize that truth belongs to his Lord, wherever it is found, gathering and acknowledging it even in pagan literature."

The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. We can find his truth all around us. I say this because as Christians, we can sometimes act like because we know Jesus, we have a corner on the truth, and our particular take on things is the only take. That's an exclusive approach that not only makes it difficult to share truth – it ignores what truth the other person may already know. And that's a tragedy, because the truth God has already given someone is often the best first rung of the ladder to climb on.

It is nothing but arrogance if we act like we are the sole source of wisdom in the world. And arrogance makes us condescending and judgmental, which are not traits that lend themselves to truth-telling. Paul's example gives us this great freedom to seek out truth we can affirm, wherever it may be. He takes the truth he finds and directs it heavenward:

"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone -- an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

Telling the truth well means...spelling it out

Paul brings it home. We're God's family, but we're a broken family. We've messed up and God is calling us to turn around and come home. The way back is through Jesus. He took all the punishment and consequences for our sins and mess ups on himself when he died, and he offers us new life through his resurrection.

Ultimately, telling truth well has to mean communicating the content of the gospel. Love is powerful, people need to know we care about them – but they also need to know what it is we're actually saying so they can respond.

How clear am I in my own head about the gospel? Can I write it out in a few sentences?

If I struggle in my own mind for a way to summarize my beliefs, I can't possibly expect that it will come out clearly when I go to share it with someone else. Telling truth well means learning to spell it out more and more clearly.

I think it's important to wrap up our time with the last lines of this story and how the crowd responded to Paul.

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed.

Here's Paul – probably THE best communicator of the gospel of all time. He gets done with this model speech where the truth has been well told, and what happens? Some members of his audience are totally mocking him. Some were saying, “Eehhh...I'm not sure yet.” And a handful – just a few – responded positively to what he had to say.

I'm a little relieved that Paul got such a small response, because it puts this whole topic in better perspective. Telling the truth well is hard, and the thing is, all our efforts won't guarantee big results. We can feel this enormous weight of responsibility to get it right for the sake of all those people who need to hear. But there comes a point where we need to trust the Holy Spirit to be the one who brings truth home. Our efforts aren't what bring salvation. We plant ideas, we water the soil, but only God can make something grow in a person's heart.

So why DO we need truth to be well told? If we're never going to get it completely right, if our best efforts don't necessarily translate into better results, why bother?

For one reason and one reason only: Because the Truth, Jesus, deserves nothing less. We seek to tell truth well because we love Jesus and want to lift him up. And the more we grapple with HOW to communicate him well, the more we are drawn into that mystery of Christ that Paul was talking about. Working on telling truth well changes us, because it pulls us in that much closer to him. And the more we're drawn into him, the more we will love him. And the truth that flows out of that close relationship with him can't help but be well-told. The one who chooses the weak things of this world to show his strength will make it so.