

“Honest To God”

Rev. David Gregory

October 3, 2021

Pentecost 20



Readings

Philippians 4:8 from *the Message* by Eugene Peterson

Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.

David Whyte in *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*

Honesty is not found in revealing the truth, but in understanding how deeply afraid of it we are. To become honest is in effect to become fully and robustly incarnated into powerlessness. Honesty allows us to live with not knowing. We do not know the full story, we do not know where we are in the story; we do not know who is at fault or who will carry the blame in the end. Honesty is not a weapon to keep loss and heartbreak at bay, honesty is the outer diagnostic of our ability to come to ground in reality, the hardest attainable ground of all, the place where we actually dwell, the living, breathing frontier where there is no realistic choice between gain or loss.

I was walking down the street the other day when I became aware of a couple of people coming up behind me. Their conversation was rather animated, and I do not know the subject of it. But what I clearly heard was a question from one to the other, “But is that *really* true?” Maybe it's because I had read the morning papers that day, and had been reminded of powerful people in our country, and particularly within our government, whose relationship to the truth is tenuous at best. There are politicians and pundits everywhere, vying for attention—and sometimes for votes—who encourage us to believe stories they have created out of thin air. Gone are the days when Walter Cronkite took fifteen minutes of our early evening to simply tell us what happened that day. No spin. No bluster. No embellishment. Simple facts that one could trust. The trust was earned, and it mattered. What we might remember from the Watergate hearings some forty-eight years ago, is that when people lied,

there were consequences. But Walter Cronkite, I'm afraid, has been replaced by social media, and instead of trusting what we see and hear, we must ask ourselves if something is "*really true*" or not. Our answer to that question will be determined by whose words we believe. And when choosing between two opposing narratives, we will be conditioned by our own experiences, perceptions, and ideals. This is the essence of being human. What do we see? How do we know? What should we do about it, and what kind of person should we be? I think we'd all agree that we should be truth tellers. But what is the truth, after all?

Theologians and philosophers have argued over the course of millennia about the existence of objective or absolute truth. Are there things that are undeniably true, no matter what? And if there are, how do we know? And how do we know that we know? And how do we know that we know that we know? This is the pursuit of an entire discipline known as epistemology. But few of us will ever find ourselves so deeply committed to our philosophical questions that we uncover what we think of as "the" truth.

As a gathered spiritual community, we are not prone to embrace dogma as objective truth. Rather, we remain comfortable in the questions as we use our gifts of Spirit, including observation, perception, and intuition. When we are asked, for example, not to believe what is clearly before our eyes and ears, it is time for us to employ our whole being—head, heart, and gut—to guide us toward what is true, honest, loving, and whole. And thanks to the particular insanities that swirl around us, we have plenty of opportunity for practice. One of our greatest needs these days is to find truth . . . as in honesty . . . as in candor . . . as in transparency. How does one live a life of forgiveness or practice soul-friendship without the bedrock of truth-telling, both to ourselves and to each other? Perhaps it begins with being honest and truthful with ourselves.

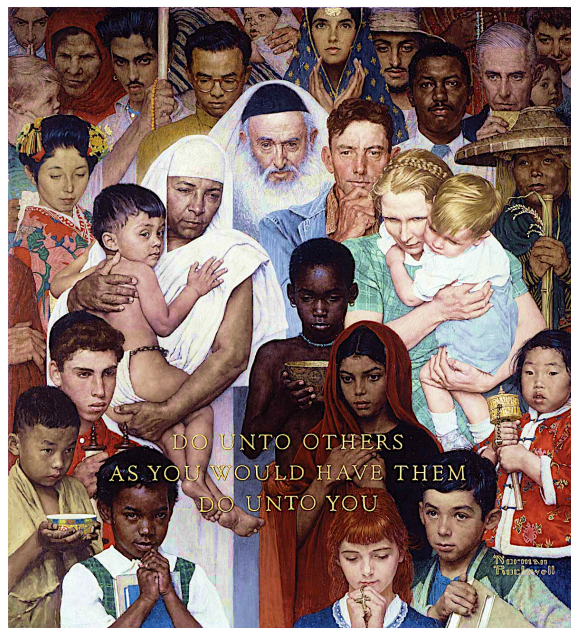
David Whyte has said that, "honesty is not found in revealing the truth, but in understanding how deeply afraid of it we are," and that it reveals our "ability to come to ground in reality, the hardest attainable ground of all, the place where we actually dwell, the living, breathing frontier where there is no realistic choice between gain or loss."

Many Christians find themselves dogmatically attached to what they believe to be objective truth. To the mind of a committed evangelical, for example, the Bible would be considered the only objective truth. But the Bible is a collection of ancient writings, filled with metaphor, and by its very nature, subject to interpretation. My academic life was given almost exclusively to the exegetical and interpretive skills I would need to stand in a pulpit one day and find something to say that would be weighty enough to matter and clear enough to ring true with my listeners. To call the Bible the only source of objective truth would be an expression of my own ego. It would mean that my interpretation of it is *the* truth, for it is impossible for anyone to speak about the Bible without interpreting it, and I am afraid I do not have the ego required to make such a claim. This is why David Whyte says that the "ability to ground ourselves in reality is the ability to come to ground in reality, the hardest attainable ground of all." In other words, truth is something that you need to work for, and the most important skill we must develop in that quest is love. It takes a great deal of love to tell the truth, and love and truth must go hand in hand. Truth without love is a weapon, and love without truth is toxic. We may be navigating some of the stormiest cultural seas to come upon us in several generations, and if there were ever a time for truthful loving, and loving truthfulness, it is now. And what better practice field for this kind of clarity and candor than "church?"

Navigating our way through a pandemic as a church community would never be an easy thing, but if we can speak our truth in a loving way, maintaining a spirit of forgiveness, the community itself can be transformed. And once transformed, it can become a microcosm and a model for something far greater than can be contained within these walls. It's a radical and revolutionary way of being. It can feel like a bumpy ride at times, but the destination is awesome!

We have been trained to think of the church as a divine institution, handed down to us from on high, and that it lives by some higher ethical quality than what has been described as "the secular." But the picture that emerges from the New Testament is of something far less holy. Jesus squabbled with his family. Paul opposed Peter to his face over his hypocrisy, and he also became so angry with Mark that he sent him packing. Two women in the church at Philippi, named Euodia and Syntyche, were at such loggerheads as to merit an apostolic rebuke. We don't know what their issue was.

The issues are irrelevant. There's something far greater at play than who runs the institution, or whose ideas win out. In the Spirit of Love, there is an entirely new way of being, one that has been taught and emulated by great teachers throughout human history. Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed (the list goes on and on) said "Love each other, as you love yourselves." "Love each other, as I have loved you." "Treat one another as you wish to be treated." And I would say, *love each other enough to tell the truth*. Love enough to believe the truth when it's right before your eyes, and in your heart, and in your gut. Love enough to admit the fault whenever it is yours. Love enough to quickly forgive the faults of others. Let's keep finding our ground in reality. It will make us the loving, skillful revolutionaries we are meant to be. This, I think, is what is *really* true.



Golden Rule
Norman Rockwell