

“Honest to God”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 6



First reading

Ephesians 4:25

from *the Message* by Eugene Peterson

No more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth.
In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all.
When you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself.

Second reading

From *Consolations*

by David Whyte

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.

Maybe you have just discovered our growing online community, or perhaps you've been following our Sunday videos during the months of this pandemic. Some of you are longtime participants or friends of our church. Whatever the convergence of our paths, we are so happy that you are here. Even from our separate locations we are finding a place to belong with one another in all kinds of new ways. What's more, we are united around common values of justice, equality, and truth, all of which transcend any differences in background or tradition.

Our current cultural reality brings with it some steep challenges, but along with those challenges are some major gifts. One of those gifts is this collective reset button. At the beginning of the pandemic it seemed like it was simply a pause, but clearly it's more than that now. Our families, our homes, our livelihoods, our commerce, our institutions—every area of life is in a state of transformation. The scope of this metamorphosis cannot be overstated, nor can it be ignored or denied. Some of the changes we thought were temporary are becoming a whole new way of life, and those who think differently are simply lying to themselves.

To say that we could flip a switch and go right back to life as it was is a lie that should never be believed. To love one's neighbor as one's self is the core of the teachings of Jesus, and that teaching is being tried and tested in ways we haven't seen since perhaps the Great Depression. The wearing of a cloth mask in public is not a political statement, it is loving one, and a living expression of the Golden Rule.

Times of upheaval are visionary times, times to be resourceful and inventive. They are also reflective times when we ask ourselves and each other, "What kind of world do we want to create?" When you start with a clean slate, just about anything is possible. We want a better world. We want a healthy planet to leave to those who come after us. We want them to find fairness and justice. We want them to experience principled leadership that is truthful and honest, a nation that is rooted in the common good instead of the self-interest of a privileged few. Whenever I look at the faces of my children and grandchildren, I say to myself that we have to do better. We have to get really honest about who we are, why we're here, and what we have come here to accomplish. And if we're going to get anywhere at all in this endeavor, we have to start by telling ourselves the truth.

In the earliest versions of Christian Community, leaders invested themselves in truth-telling, and it wasn't just because of the prohibition against bearing false witness. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul said that truth-telling was essential because we're all connected. It is a lie to say that we are all independent disconnected individuals. All of sacred writings are woven together with the idea of interdependence. Ego-driven individualism creates endless cycles of oppression that can only be overcome by the truth. And the truth is, we are members one of another, and the universe is made up of a single source of divine energy of which we are all part. In biblical language, we are all partakers of divine essence, drinking of a single cup called Spirit.

You can use whatever terminology you like for this divine essence, but it is the energy that breathes us and beats our hearts. It is the power that creates worlds, and it lives fully in every cell of our bodies. It is the light that emanates from every one of us, and from every living creature, every plant, every animal, every mountain, every ocean, and every star of the sky. It is the buzzing of the hummingbirds who visit the flowers on our deck, it is the dull roar of the mass of humanity in the city where I live. It is the kindness of strangers. It is the feeding of the hungry. It is hospitality for the wanderers and sojourners of the world who are looking for a better life. It is the inclusion of everyone in the arms of divine love. No one is rejected, because we are part of the whole. So there is no point at all in lying. When you lie to others, you are lying to yourself. To make the Christian message anything other than that is to deny the very nature of why we're here.

English poet and philosopher David Whyte has said that his work is based in the "conversational nature of reality." A favorite book of mine is his *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, published about five years ago. One of his "everyday words" is *honesty*. "Honesty," he says, "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."

These words perhaps reveal to us why truth-telling has become such a lost art in our world, and especially in our national leadership. It is all about power. To be ruled by truth is to admit that there are things we do not know, and to admit that is to say that we cannot dominate or control others around us. Honesty puts all of us on the same interdependent plane. It makes us equals. It gives us real information and puts us into a place of true communication. Nowhere does it say that this is necessarily comfortable for everyone, but it is definitely the better route to go.

In elementary school we learned the words of Benjamin Franklin that “honesty is the best policy.” The legend of George Washington and the cherry tree ends with the words “I cannot tell a lie.” And our union survived a bloody civil war led by the one called “honest Abe.” We grew up in a time when truth and honesty seemed like simple concepts. We were taught that lies had consequences and none of them were good. But that was before our collective shadow became so fully evident. These days, what is "true" depends on who you are listening to. Are we to believe the politicians or the scientists? Which cable network is telling us the truth? Which newspaper is giving us the news that isn't fake?

As David Whyte reminds us, honesty is far more than telling the truth; it is about who we are as human beings, and whether or not we can stay with our own shadow long enough to recognize our fear of not knowing. As spiritual beings having a human experience, we must now commit ourselves to the value of honesty, and we certainly cannot require it of others without practicing it ourselves. From a root level, let's plant the seeds of truth and watch them grow into the world we long for.

