

LIFE OVEN WITH JESUS: Truth-Telling

I want us to hear a story from Luke 11.37-46. As you follow along, either in a Bible that's in your hands, or that shows on the screen, or that fills your ears, focus not so much on what Jesus says as on the fact that he says it

So one of the Pharisees invites Jesus to dinner. Sounds like a nice gesture. Jesus sits down to eat and doesn't wash his hands the way Jewish custom commanded. His host notices the custom violation, but doesn't say anything about it. Maybe he got a scornful look across his face or something, but he didn't say anything. But Jesus unloads on him anyway.

Jesus sounds like somebody who's had a bad day at work who comes home in no mood to deal with anyone or anything. So the first thing anybody in the house says, sets him or her off like a fireworks display. Gee mom, I just asked whether I could play in the backyard. Wow, dad. I just wanted to tell you what happened in my science class today. Gee honey. All I asked was how was your day. And boom!

We almost want to feel bad for the Pharisee. He didn't ask for the abuse... except that he did, and that's sort of the point today. He didn't ask for it in that moment, as in giving Jesus a hard time for his failure to wash his hands. But he asked for it by the way he lived his life, by the hypocrisy and greed that filled his heart and directed his actions. He didn't ask for it in that moment, but he deserved it in that and so many other moments. And Jesus gave it to him because Jesus was a truth teller.

Another example, in its way, even more harsh than that one. Matthew 16. Peter has just proclaimed Jesus to be the Christ, God's chosen one. It's one of the stirring moments of confession found anywhere in Scripture. Immediately after that exalting moment, Jesus tells his disciples that he's headed for Jerusalem where he will be killed, but on the third day, be raised from the dead. In response to that Peter says (22)... And in response to what comes across as Peter's heartfelt concern for his well-being, Jesus says (23)... Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap for me. All I said, dear, was take care of yourself. Boom!

Remember that I asked you to pay attention not so much to what Jesus said as to the fact that he said it. He gives the Pharisee a rhetorical shakedown. He gives Peter a stern rebuke. He speaks the truth, even though the truth was likely not easy for its recipients to hear.

The Pharisees - like almost all of us - were hypocrites. They didn't practice what they preached. The dinner host deserved the critique, though perhaps Jesus could have delivered it in a different setting, or a different tone.

Peter didn't understand that God's will for Jesus called for a rendezvous with a cross. There was no choice. And if Jesus adopted Peter's protectionist spirit, God's will would have been thwarted, which Jesus could not allow to happen. Peter needed to hear those hard words.

Jesus spoke the truth. We can argue about his word choice or voice tone, but we can't argue with the conclusion: He spoke the truth.

In modern politics we hear the phrase speak truth to power. What's that mean? It means tell the truth to people who have power, authority, influence - in the company, in the government, wherever. Tell them what they need to hear - even if it's hard, possibly risky, to tell them, even if they don't like it.

We all know there are times when it's hard to speak the truth. Family interventions occur when family members decide to confront their loved ones with the truth about their addictive behaviors. Those are hard but necessary conversations to have. Family members risk anger, alienation, all kinds of consequences from speaking that kind of truth.

I remember the time my siblings and I had to tell our dad that he couldn't live on his own anymore. That was a hard conversation to have because our dad was an independent spirit.

You've had conversations like that. I'm sure. Moments when you had to speak a hard truth to a friend, a family member, or a co worker, when you took all kinds of risks by saying what you said, but you said it because it needed to be said. And I bet you've had people tell you uncomfortable truths, too.

As followers of Jesus, we speak the truth. We speak it in love. We speak the truth with compassion and mercy. We offer forgiveness as well as judgment. But we speak the truth.

If you follow the news, you've heard the suggestions that we are living in a post-truth age. Post-truth. It means you can have your truth and I can have my truth, and they can have their truth. The biblical truth is you and I may have our opinions, but we aren't allowed our own truths. As followers of Jesus, we speak righteousness, we speak forgiveness, we speak love for God and love for neighbor, we speak living in the world but not of the world. And we speak the truth to our world.

So this week, keep that in mind. If someone needs to hear an uncomfortable truth, speak it - in love, with grace, with forgiveness - but speak it. If God moves in your heart and tells you to speak up on behalf of people who don't have a voice, on behalf of social policies that take of the least of these. Speak up. If you run into a conflict between your values and your comfort, do the right thing and make sure you tell somebody why you believe it was the right thing.

As followers of Jesus we speak the truth. We tell the truth - to each other, to our family and friends, to ourselves. We speak even the hardest truths, what we usually call confession. Confession is truth telling, you know. I did it. It's my fault. I didn't follow through. I broke it. I'm responsible. For us as followers of Jesus, truth telling is not just about speaking truth to power, or speaking truth to friends and family; it's about admitting the truth about ourselves. We're not perfect. We're not always right. Our opinions aren't more important than the opinions of other people's. The first person to whom each of us must speak the truth is ourselves. Remember what Jesus said about removing the logs in our own eyes before criticizing people for the splinters in their eyes? The same is true about our speaking the truth. First to ourselves, then to others.

Jesus said (John 8.31-32) "You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Speaking the truth to the hypocritical Pharisees, to his disciples, to Herod and Pilate after his arrest, set Jesus free, it liberated him to live completely surrendered, completely dependent on God. Speaking the truth this week, to others and to yourself, will set you free. Free of the need to be somebody you're not. Free of the need to impress people or endure attitudes and behaviors you don't need in your life.

The biblical standard is to speak the truth in love - to pursue the truth, to live the truth, to share the truth. I don't know how or when, but sometime this week, you will have a chance to stand up for the truth. Take it.