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“People Talk About the Truth” by Rev. Jessica Vaughan Lower

Truth telling has often been a delicate business of learning how to dance around fine lines. These days, discussions about truth and what is true have developed a unique vernacular. “Fake news,” “alternative facts,” “mainstream media,” are all phrases that evoke different associations and allegiances, different emotions and reactions. And, as anyone with a social media feed knows, in all our agreements and disagreements about what is true and how we talk about truth, very rarely do we, as intelligent people, encounter an unknown ‘truth.’ Very rarely do we change. Very rarely do we open ourselves to transformation, enlightenment, or inspiration. More common than not, we put our energy into doubling down on what we have always known to be true.

There’s a story in the Christian New Testament that offers a unique perspective on how an exchange on truth can happen between two people. In the Gospel of John, Jesus encounters a woman at a well. The woman is certain that she knows how the well works and about how water functions, but so is Jesus. Soon they find that their ideas about wells and water don’t match up (How can anyone disagree about something as basic as water?) and they end up disagreeing over a resource that they both need, that they both value, and that they both want at the same time.

Jesus starts, “Can I have some water?” The woman responds, “How can you ask me for water? We’re not the same race.” Then Jesus, “If you could recognize the image of God in me, *you’d* have asked *me* for water.” The woman, “Why would I ask you for water? You don’t have anything to draw water with in a well this deep!” And Jesus, “I know how to draw water from an eternal source that never returns humanity to thirst.”

If that’s not an example of an ancient social media feed, then I don’t know what is. The woman is talking about what she needs to survive, and Jesus is talking about what they both need to live. They are both talking about the same thing, but also about different functions.

In a stark change of subject, Jesus makes a strange request. “Go, call your husband and come back.” There’s always ‘that guy’ who changes the subject to make a point on a social media. “I have no husband,” she replies, telling the truth.

And Jesus says to her, “That’s right. You don’t have one husband, but five husbands, and the guy you’re living with now is not your husband. You *are* telling the truth.”

And there we have it. The woman is telling the truth, and so is Jesus. She shares the truth of her shame, and he shares the truth of her acceptance and belonging in the face of her shame—because we can’t forget that, in the end, it’s to this woman that Jesus shares the truth of *his* character, affirming unequivocally that he is the One she and all of her people have been waiting for. Though it sounds like they are in tense disagreement (and perhaps they are!), it’s not because either is neglecting the truth. They are just prioritizing different things: she is focused on survival, and he is focused on life to the full.

Discussions about ‘truth’ often draw fragile lines of division between us—friends, family, strangers, co-workers—but truth does not need to divide us. As the story of the woman at the well and Jesus illustrates for us, truth being told at the sacrifice of our self-preservation (rather than being told in our self-defense) has the power to invite us into relationship, acceptance, and belonging. Writer Elaine Gale once said, “You can’t change what you’re not telling the truth about.” Which is to say, perhaps we stand the chance of being transformed by a united inspiration and by our collective hope, when we choose to tell the truth about ourselves to one another.