

WHO DO YOU TRUST?

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From 1956-63 there was a game show on TV called “Who Do You Trust?” It pitted three couples against each other in a quiz show format. Host, Johnny Carson, would announce a category and then ask the husband: “Do you want to take a question from this category, or will you trust your wife to answer it?” Each couple would answer three questions of increasing point value with the winning couple receiving a cash prize.

How simple and innocent that question was back then: Who do you trust?

Today, trust is more problematic. We live in a time and a culture where truth telling seems to have lost much of its cachet. Lies and lying are dismissed as “the way life is.” Cover-ups are shrugged off as business as usual. Sifting our way through false claims, dishonest labeling, half-truths, and misleading innuendo are simply part of what it means to live in the 21st century.

Truth, it often seems, is optional. We use it when it suits us, when our publicists say we should, when the cover-up has disintegrated, when the cost isn’t too high. And consequently, we find ourselves living in a limbo of doubt and fear.

Who can we trust? Who, indeed.

THE WORLD

To whom can we turn when we want and need the absolute, unadulterated, un-spun truth? Who can be trusted to tell it like it really is?

Certainly not business. Enron lied. Toyota covered up their brake problems. Goldman Sacks sold unwise and unsound investments and then bet against their own clients. Citigroup, Bank of America, and Morgan Stanley were giving huge bonuses to their traders and executives even as our tax money was being used to bail them out of the consequences of the bad decisions made by those employees. BP’s news releases about the Deep-Water Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico change daily. Do any of us really believe anything BP says anymore?

Can politics and politicians be trusted? Probably not. Richard Nixon lied about Watergate, Ronald Regan’s advisors lied to him and us about Iran-Contra, and Bill Clinton lied about Monica Lewinski. Joe Biden’s staff lied to us about his cognitive decline and just this last week, Donald Trump tried to convince us that white genocide was taking place in South Africa by ruffling through some magazine articles about crime in The Congo. Elections are based on spin more than truth. It’s no wonder people find themselves possessed of a cynicism that simply does not allow them to believe anything uttered by any politician except the ones they know personally.

Sports figures – well, do I really need to go there? Tiger Woods was a serial philanderer, Ben Rothlisberger molested women in his hotel room and the league paid them to not report him. And have we forgotten Inflate-gate about the semi deflated footballs that the Patriots used in the Super Bowl?

Even organized religion is losing its credibility. Hardly a week goes by that we don't read about another sexual or financial scandal in the churches – protestant and Catholic. How much of what we hear from religious leaders can we believe?

Many of us can remember when Walter Cronkite ended his nightly network news broadcast with the phrase, "That's the way it is." He was, according to polls taken at that time, the most trusted man in America. How much do we trust our news media, today? Even our most respected publications have to be read with a healthy dose of skepticism made necessary by their own reporters. Janet Cooke at the *Washington Post*, Stephen Glass at the *New Republic*, Jayson Blair at the *New York Times* and Jack Kelly at *USA Today* all deceived their editors and readers by publishing as news stories that were total fiction. (To their credit, those publications didn't try to cover up their mistakes. They admitted them and fired the ones responsible.)

Cable news outlets have confused opinions for news, forgetting Bill Moyers's caveat that when you split the difference between two opinions, what you get is not truth, but simply a third opinion.

When a naturalized citizen who pledged before God to protect and uphold the constitution tries to set off a bomb in Time's Square it's hard to find fault with those who, in fear and trembling, ask, "Can any naturalized citizens be trusted?"

If police officers in Memphis are acquitted of beating a man to death when we saw them do it on video taken by the cameras on their uniforms, and New York City police are convicted of brutalizing an innocent man, can we trust police in Arizona to use good judgment and discretion in applying new immigration laws?

And, brothers and sisters, even you and I can't be trusted. The IRS estimates that 30-40 percent of those who filed federal income tax returns this year lied on the return. The most common lie? Amount given in charitable donations. The most common unproven charitable donation? Church.

Perhaps even scarier than the number of lies being told are the number of people who are perfectly willing to believe them.

In a Harris poll taken a few years ago and pretty much ignored by the popular press on both sides of the political spectrum, some shocking figures indicate that a whole lot of Americans prefer to believe claims which support their politics regardless of the distance those claims have from the truth.

According to that poll, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, 32 percent of Americans believe that former President Obama is a Muslim and 25 percent believe that he is not an American citizen.

If we can't trust our business leaders or our politicians or our sports heroes or even each other, then who do we trust? Who do we believe? And how do we react, as Christians, when we find ourselves surrounded not just by lies and those who tell them but by those who happily accept and approve of them as well?

THE WORD

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (*John 8: 31-32*)

This passage is not, strictly speaking, included in the lectionary readings for this week but the story in Acts 16 does bear it out. In this story any number of people are freed by the truth.

Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke have come to the wealthy, thoroughly modern town of Philippi. There they have met Lydia who, after hearing them speak, accepts Christ and is baptized along with her entire household. When she invites Paul and company to stay for a few days at her home and help her organize a group of new Christian believers, they agree.

One day when Paul and Silas are walking through the marketplace a young slave girl who is, according to the story, "possessed by a spirit of divination" sees them and announces to everyone that they are "slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Now this is not the first time she has done this. Apparently, she does it every time they come to town and, for reasons that are not explained, Paul has begun to find it annoying. Frustrated, he turns to her and exorcizes the spirit without so much as a mother-may-I or a by-your-leave.

She is freed from the spirit which possessed her.

But her owners, who had put her on display and made money from her, are not pleased. They grab Paul and Silas, drag them before the local authorities and lie about them. They do not charge Paul and Silas with depriving them of their livelihood but of sedition!

The Roman authorities have them flogged and thrown into jail and put in stocks without even a proper trial.

That night an earthquake knocks down the stocks and opens the jail cells. The jailer, sure he will be blamed for letting the prisoners escape draws his sword to commit suicide but Paul calls out to him. "Don't hurt yourself. We're all here. None of us has run away."

So grateful is the jailer that he releases them from jail, takes them to his home, cares for their wounds and is, himself, converted to Christianity along with his whole household. Later he will become instrumental in Paul and Silas winning their freedom.

The juxtaposition of truth and lies in this story is undeniable.

The slave girl speaks the truth about Paul and Silas but it is valued by her owners only because they can make money from it and her. Paul allows that this is not an appropriate way for truth to be used and puts an end to it by exorcising the spirit from the girl.

As a reward for the high value he places on truth, Paul is, himself, beaten and jailed with Silas, the victims of vicious lies. They might have been spared this harsh treatment had they pointed out that they were Roman citizens but they chose not to, using the opportunity, instead, to witness to the truth of their faith in Jesus Christ.

When the earthquake occurs, they, once again, use the occasion not to grab their freedom and run away but to witness to the very one who is their jailer and, as a result, he and his family are freed from fear and self-hatred.

Truth and freedom are, in this story, tightly intertwined.

THE LESSONS

What imperative comes to us from this important Bible story? Well, I believe there are, in fact, three lessons:

1. The Appropriate Use of Truth Telling

Paul holds truth as something to be used in a high and important purpose, i.e. salvation. The slave holders could argue that they had made no offense as their slave girl only spoke the truth about Paul and Silas. Yet, Paul noted that truth and falsehood held no meaning for them except as ways to make money. One would have been as good as the other.

Human beings alone, among all the creatures on the earth, have the ability to differentiate between truth and falsehood, between spoken lies and spoken truths.

And because of this ability we have, traditionally, held truth telling to be one of the higher values. In some cultures, truth telling is held as a value among kindred folk but not held as a value when dealing with outsiders. One is allowed to tell the truth or lie to outsiders as one wishes or depending on what advantage one might gain either way.

But for Christians, truth telling is ALWAYS a value no matter who we are dealing with. We stretch the truth or tell outright lies with great fear and trembling, knowing when we do it that we are treading in perilous territory and dangerous ground. One untruth, we know, leads to another and it takes only a few before we have lost our credibility all together.

Truth telling is, in fact, such a high value that we are not allowed to use it as a weapon, a club with which we brutalize other persons for our own amusement or to gain some advantage and then dismiss any harm we have caused by saying, "I was only telling the truth." When we know that the truth might hurt someone, we learn to couch the truth, to wrap it in soft and gentle terms so that it causes as little pain as possible.

And, certainly, we do not use truth as just another bartering tool that we use to make money. Truth is the better way, the higher road. Truth, mitigated and softened with kindness and gentleness is the appropriate, indeed, the only Christian way.

2. The Victims of Lies

It has been argued by some scholars that Paul and Silas, being Roman citizens, were exempt, by Roman law from demeaning or cruel punishments, including flogging and being placed in stocks. Also, their citizenship prohibited them from being jailed without formal charges being made against them. All they would have had to do is identify themselves as Roman citizens and they might have avoided the severe punishment that was visited upon them in Philippi.

But they did not wish to avoid it. They understood that their prosecution was persecution and persecution is often the most effective tool for the evangelist. Our witness as Christians is never more powerful than when it is spoken through tears of genuine pain or anguish or from behind the bars of undeserved imprisonment. This is as true of Paul's letters as it is of Martin Luther King Junior's *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

In 21st century America Christians often resent any kind of inconvenience that is placed on them. They prefer to speak of, indeed, demand their rights. They want equal time from the media and deference from the government. But one might legitimately ask what effect these demands have on our effectiveness as evangelists and recall that Jesus calls us to take up not a life of ease but a cross.

How many of us would have gone willingly to those jail cells, as did Paul and Silas? How many of us would have lifted our voices in song and prayer as we sat in the stocks waiting for God to act?

3. It Wasn't Always this Easy to be a Christian

When the crowd dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities in the marketplace, they made three accusations against them: A.) They were disturbing the city (a lie); B.) They were Jews (not a crime in the Roman Empire); and C.) They were advocating customs that were not lawful for Romans (another lie).

The first accusation was an appeal to the fear and paranoia that is always present in the minds of an occupying army. They must demand and enforce absolute control. No disturbance to the established order can be allowed or tolerated. Every citizen is a potential insurgent and must, of necessity, be treated as such.

So, they knew that the Roman authorities could not afford to ask if the accusation was true or false. They would take the safe route and react quickly and brutally to any possibility of a disturbance of the peace.

The second accusation – that they were Jews – was simply an appeal to ethnic hatred and nothing more. It was a racist slur. Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman Empire and could not, by law, be prohibited or punished. But laws cannot quickly bend the hearts of those who have learned their hatreds at their parents' knees. So, while the accusation was true, it was a truth used as a weapon to abuse and mistreat two men who had done nothing to deserve such treatment.

The third accusation was just an outright, bald-face lie. Paul and Silas had done nothing illegal and had urged no one to do anything that was illegal -- at least, not yet. Eventually, well, that would be a different story.

What the early Christians would stand for would be the worship and adoration of the one true God and his son, Jesus Christ...and not the Emperor. And that was considered treason and was punishable by death. That made Christianity not just another belief system flying along under the radar but a revolution that threatened to overturn the conventional knowledge and wisdom of the day.

See, it wasn't always as easy to be a Christian as it is now. One is reminded of the old bumper sticker that asked, "If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

For the early missionaries of the Christian Gospel, Christianity wasn't just about what you believed, it was about what you lived every moment, every second of your life, even when it was dangerous to do so. It was about living a truth so convincing, so compelling, so demanding that, even in the face of danger, they could not do otherwise.

The truth matters. There is no lie so small or inconsequential that it does not poison the value system of those who willingly accept it or let it pass un-remarked.

Let us pray this day with all Christians, that prayer which says: "From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth; from the laziness that is content with half-truths; from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth – oh God of Truth deliver us!"

AMEN