

“Truth Telling”
Micah 6:9-15; Ephesians 4:14-5:2;
Matthew 5:33-37; John 8:42-47

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As we think about this idea of truth telling, one of the most iconic scriptures is the story of Adam and Eve and their decision not to trust God. They decided that God must not be telling the truth about that tree they weren't supposed to eat from. They listened to the counsel of another instead, and their own counsel as well, and decided to go a different way. When the consequences of that weren't quite what they wanted them to be, they also decided not to tell the truth. They decided they would hide from God rather than coming out and telling God what was wrong. Then when God asked what was wrong, they didn't quite tell the truth about what was going on, feeling ashamed that they weren't dressed but not the shame of what they had done. They started to shift blame fairly early.

So when we come to reading Ephesians and it talks about the Gentiles “living in the futility of their minds,” we have this story that goes all the way back to our beginnings, in some ways our founding story, about how humankind can live so easily in the futility of their own minds. Taking their own counsel. Leaving God behind. Not thinking that God had shown them the way, but they are going to find it on their own.

In Ephesians it says it's so easy to be “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.” It starts to paint this picture of how we tend to live with one another in different shades of deceit and what that might look like, and how it feels like being tossed to and fro.

It just keeps piling on in Ephesians – “darkened in their understanding” which leads to a “hardness of heart.” It feels to me like we try something, we're told that it's supposed to work, it's supposed to make us happy, we're supposed to go this way and life will be wonderful, and we go that way and find it doesn't quite live up to the hype. So we go look for something else—another way that might make us happy.

When I was in high school, I dreamed of having the right car, and that right car would make everything in the world better. I soon found that didn't really quite work. Then I had another dream. I dreamed of becoming an astronaut, and going through college found that that dream wasn't going to work out. It's so easy to go from dream to dream and find that they're not quite what they were cracked up to be, not what I expected. I wonder what I'm listening to, what voice? I recognize in some ways that my understanding is darkened and I don't quite get it.

It feels like if I go off and follow different ways that end up being ways that don't quite work out or don't live up to the hype that they had, that my life isn't as wonderful as it was supposed to be, then I can begin to build that hardness of heart, a losing of sensitivity to others. I begin to wonder if I'm not getting what I'm supposed to be, if I'm missing something that everybody else seems to be getting. I'm tired of everybody else

getting more, somehow. I can begin to see others as simply competitors and lose track of them being another human being, become insensitive to their needs. If they get what they want, I may not get what I want. I can even begin to think that other people are less important, even less than human. It really begins to show how far we can go in our ignorance and darkening of understanding. I can recognize that I begin to lie to myself that the things I do don't affect other people. Not only is the hardness of heart something that resides within, it becomes like this weight I pull through life.

I think that if we follow what it says in Ephesians, that as we allow our hearts to be hardened in that way, as we begin to fear the world or struggle with not getting what we want, we begin to define the other as a problem and look out for ourselves. I've heard recently that there's this idea of The Survivor morality. If you watched the first season of Survivor, the guy who made it through to the end wasn't the good guy who was helping everybody else out. He ended up being the guy who lied and back stabbed, but was very good at getting people to believe him. If we want that kind of life, it feels like what Ephesians suggests is that it ends up that we are abandoning ourselves to licentiousness. We are abandoning the sense of what's right and good, and going a different way—"greedy to practice all impurity," and "deluded by our lusts." What it feels like Ephesians says is that takes us to a particular place. It takes us to a place of "bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, together with malice." I don't know about you, but those are not words that I particularly want to describe my life. I like this definition of bitterness: It's like drinking poison and expecting somebody else to die. It feels like that is exactly where this description in Ephesians is taking us. It takes us to a place where we're drinking our own poison and expecting the world to change because of it.

It's easy to get there, but there is a solution as well. I think part of the way we get there is because we end up alienated from God. It's the same old story in some ways. We don't listen to the counsel of God. We go off on our own. We decide we know better. I don't know how many times I thought I knew better and found out I didn't.

As I come and listen and open my life to God, there is a change. There is a difference. Ephesians invites us to do it this way: "Grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

This passage, for me, creates this incredible contrast. I can live my life in a way that's going to end up in a place of bitterness, and anger, and malice, or I can trust in God and listen to God and think about what it means to be part of a body that lifts each other up in love.

It goes on to talk about putting on the clothing of Christ. This metaphor is a great one for thinking about the story of The Emperor's New Clothes. Perhaps you know that story. In so many ways, it feels like what the world offers us is a smokescreen, this set of clothes that we're supposed to see and put on, but aren't really there. Sometimes,

perhaps, it takes a child to ask the right question and invite us to see things differently. Ephesians is inviting us to put on a different kind of clothing, that is, to have a different kind of life—to put on the life of Christ. It goes on to talk about a few of the ways that life looks. It says to put away falsehood, not only in the way we talk to others, but sometimes I think I have to put away falsehood in the way I talk to myself. I can pretty easily convince myself of stuff that's not true because that's the way I want it to be. It's a truth telling that has to start in some ways with myself as well as with my neighbor.

It says to recognize your emotions, but don't be driven by them. It actually talks about anger—experience your anger, but don't go to bed angry. Don't let it follow you. Don't let your emotions be what drives your life. Perhaps you can use them to understand things, to give you insights, to see why it comes up and what it's about. It's different than letting it drive everything we do.

“Work honestly.” One of the biggest struggles I have when somebody defines their business as a Christian business is that if this isn't followed it feels like we're dissing Christ. The trouble I have is that it's hard to always be honest. It takes work. It's work to be honest.

Then to cap it off, instead of malice, bitterness, wrath and all those other terrible things, Ephesians suggests this: “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” I really struggle when I'm expected to be in community with other Christians who don't seem to think that tenderheartedness is a good thing. It feels to me like this is central, in some ways. If we are to tell the truth in love and don't have the tenderheartedness, we've lost part of the equation. If we don't have the idea of being kind to one another, we are not following Christ.

Jesus is talking about some of these same kinds of things, but in a slightly different way. He's saying let your yes be yes, or your no be no. Particularly don't try to just throw up that pious smokescreen of religious talk. Let your actions and your words be consistent. I like the phrase that Eugene Peterson has used: “Jesus just wants to give us plain talk about what it is to be a disciple, to be a follower.” I think we can start with some very basic things that he has told us, that we probably all know in one way or another. Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. The Golden Rule: do unto others as you want them to do to you. And, care for the least of these.

In some ways, I think if I could use these four things as a guide for my life, the rule for my life, I just wonder how much better it might be. Because when God comes to show us the wonder of his love in Jesus Christ and invites us to be his children, he invites us to live our lives according to the way Christ has taught us. To not be deceived by the world and not to try to deceive, but to live by the plain talk that Jesus has given us, the guidance he's shown us.

The truth is that I don't know that I can do all this on my own. It seems to me that there's always this invitation to begin trying and that as we try and remain open to God

at work within us, the Spirit is present and working. The way it says it is Ephesians is that he will mark us with a seal. My sense is what it's inviting us to recognize is that as we hear Christ's word, as we try to live out the plain descriptions of who he asks us to be, that our lives will begin to be marked with a seal. That is, our lives will show the very goodness and grace of God.

As we live, we are not alone and the Spirit will work with us. We will live in a community of faith that invites us and guides us, and we will get to build each other up in love as we follow Christ and leave the deceptions of the world behind. Amen.