***SPEAK THE TRUTH FROM YOUR HEART!***

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Texts: Psalm 15 and 1 Corinthians 13:1-7, 13

*Walk blamelessly and do the right thing!* That was the helpful advice offered by the psalmist in the opening verses of the 15th Psalm as we heard last week. In his paraphrase of this psalm Eugene Peterson (no relation) suggests it is the response to this question of God:

*Who gets invited to dinner at your place?*

*How do we get on your guest list?[[1]](#endnote-1)*

*“Walk blamelessly and do the right thing!"* says the psalmist. It is good advice, if not actually to secure a divine dinner invitation, at least to live a good life in God’s eyes. It is the kind of advice a parent might offer a child heading off to college or a grandparent might offer a rebellious grandchild at the midpoint of a long day. But the advice lacks any specificity. How exactly do you walk blamelessly? What is the “right thing” to do? Some folks might be content to say that it is like Justice Potter Stewart’s observation about pornography: “I can’t describe it in words, but I know it when I see it.” But the psalmist takes the time to offer more direction. Over the next several weeks we will consider what further guidance and examples he offers to clarify what he means when he says: *Walk blamelessly and do the right thing*! The list is not intended to be exhaustive, but it does offer a little more clarity about this righteous path we all are to follow. Where then does he begin? The psalmist begins with your lips and your heart and the thread that ties the two together: *Speak the truth from your heart!*

Most of us think of a connection, not between the heart and the lips, but between the brain and the lips, a link which seems to be missing in some folks from time to time. A friend of our family once said of my young brother, “You don’t have to worry about what he’s thinking, because he’s saying it!” That may suggest a direct connection between the brain and the lips, but the connection between the heart and the lips seems more tenuous, or at least biologically less evident. Yet it is that link between heart and lips that is the concern of the psalmist.

One explanation for that seeming oddity is that in the psalmist’s day there was a different understanding of where thoughts and feelings resided. In brief, everything moved down the body one level. Thinking and decision-making were linked to the heart while emotions resided in the gastro-intestinal track, and some residue of that perspective continues in our language today. Having a change of mind is often described as a change of heart; some decisions are made on a *gut instinct* while bad news may be received as a *gut punch*, descriptive of where the emotions provoke visceral responses. For the psalmist, the link between heart and lips was not odd at all; encouragement to speak the truth from your heart urged a thoughtful or faithful response. Think before you speak, he might say today. Or, choose your words carefully!

Too often folks don’t think before they speak or are careless with their words, and the results can range from the humorous to the unintentionally tragic. At the door of the church after worship one Sunday I met an actress who I had seen in a play at the Blackfriars the night before. Without really thinking, I said to her, “You were great last night! I really had a good time.” With a coy smile and not a moment’s hesitation she replied, “Thanks. It was really good for me too.” And with a red face I was suddenly reminded: Choose your words carefully! Think before you speak! Words matter!

But the psalmist encourages more than just thoughtful words. It is not just speaking from the heart that is encouraged, but speaking ***the truth*** from your heart. The truth seems more elusive than ever these days; conspiracy theories, lies about the election, and gross misstatements about vaccines are ongoing sources of conflict, tensions, and suffering in our nation and world. The truth is warped to suit individual agendas or perspectives, and social media has fueled that fire. In an editorial this week Catherine Rampell writes:

*Misinformation has flourished on Facebook and other sites for many years. Unlike truth, lies are unconstrained by reality, which means they can be crafted to be maximally interesting, sexy, terrifying. In other words, they’re optimized to generate traffic…[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Mark Twain expressed a similar sentiment more poetically well over a century ago when social media was far less sophisticated: “*A lie can travel halfway around the world, while the truth is putting on its shoes.*”

The psalmist, echoing the commandment, affirms God’s desire for us to tell the truth. *You shall not bear false witness* may be the commandment, but its inverse is God’s commandment too: *Don’t lie!* For the consequences of lying impact not only others, but the one telling the lie as well. As Howard Thurman notes in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*:

*The penalty of deception is to become a deception, with all sense of moral discrimination vitiated. A man who lies habitually becomes a lie, and it is increasingly impossible for him to know when he is lying and when he is not. In other words, the moral mercury of life is reduced to zero.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

That has become all too apparent in our public life! Lies beget lies! But we must be cautious of sitting in judgment of others on that count without also taking account of our own words. Do you speak ***the truth*** from your heart?

The truth is not always easy to discern, and not always easy to hear, and that sometimes makes the truth hard to speak. I am not talking here of your sugar-coated response to my question: “Does this robe make me look fat?” There are more consequential truths that we may hesitate to voice because the truth is painful or unpopular or controversial. So we fall silent when we should speak in response to unjust actions or racist remarks or bullying taunts. Our call is to speak the truth from our hearts, and sometimes that means placing ourselves in uncomfortable situations in order to speak the truth to power or to unjust actors or in response to blatant lies when the easier thing to do is to remain silent.

Perhaps no one faced those challenges more than the prophets who were called by God to proclaim a word from the Lord to a king or to people who did not want to hear what the Lord had to say. Faithful prophets proclaimed that word anyway, not because it was what ***they*** wanted to say, but because it was what ***God*** wanted to say through them. It was God’s truth they were called to proclaim, God’s work they were doing! Not everyone wants to hear that truth, but we who call ourselves disciples of Jesus are called to speak it anyway. “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” says Jesus. We are called to speak that truth, to tell the world the story of Jesus and God’s love for the world – for all the world, not just for some. We are called to speak the truth that Jesus gave us to speak:

the truth of love for all people – friends and enemies alike;

the truth of hope in the face of despair and life in the face of death;

the truth of forgiveness for our sins – not for some of our sins but for all of

them;

the truth that the first are not the rich and powerful but the poor and

outcast;

the truth that we are called, not to be served, but to serve;

the truth of God’s love for us that never ends.

That is the truth we are called to proclaim. It is truth that contradicts the lies that the world keeps telling about the power of weapons and violence, the comfort of wealth and its trappings, the elevation of your selfish good over the public good, the primacy of any nation over any other nation in God’s eyes, for we ALL are children of God. We are called to speak that truth; but we are called to speak that truth ***in love***.

It is that command that comes shining through these words of the psalmist read in light of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. *Speak the truth from the heart* means *speak the truth in love* when we hear Paul write: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal.” God does not call us to be noisy gongs or clanging cymbals! God calls us to speak the truth in love!

More times than I can count I have wanted to speak the truth out of anger – to rail against the lies about voter fraud that have no bases in facts, to dismiss the mean-spirited conspiracy theories that seek only to turn political neighbor against political neighbor, to roundly reject the false statements about vaccines that justify continuing to put others at risk. And about the time that I get on my high horse, ready to do battle and put to use some of my best litigator’s skills in slaying some dragon, these two little words come crashing down on my head: ***in love***. *Speak the truth in love*. *And love is patient and kind. Love is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way*. And I am forced to swallow bitter words that were far more tainted with righteous indignation than with love.

In his book *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, the greattheologian Reinhold Niebuhr notes:

*To speak the truth in love is a difficult, and sometimes an almost impossible, achievement. If you speak the truth unqualifiedly, that is usually because your ire has been aroused or because you have no personal attachment to the object of your strictures. Once personal contact is established you are very prone to temper your wind to the shorn sheep. It is certainly difficult to be human and honest at the same time.”[[4]](#endnote-4)*

Yet that is what we are called to do – to speak the truth in love, from the heart – not some of the time, but all of the time. That does not mean that we do not confront the lies or injustices we oppose. But it does mean that we remember that those to whom we speak are also children of God, worthy of love and respect even if we disagree with them. It means searching for ways of speaking the truth that enhance the possibility that the truth will be heard beyond just the noisy gong or clanging cymbal of our outrage. It means resisting the temptation to belittle or condemn those with whom we speak in order to gain some advantage. It means, fundamentally, talking ***with*** people instead of ***at*** them. And the hardest part may be, that we are called to speak the truth in love even when we are not spoken to in love, even when those with whom we are speaking are not very loveable!

Can you do that? Can you temper your tongue enough to speak the truth in love? Can you think before you speak and honor both the truth you proclaim and the love with which you are to proclaim it? For that is how we are called to speak – to our friends, to our family, to our neighbors, and to our enemies. In a nation and world divided, perhaps that is the starting point for bridging the gap – speaking the truth from the heart, speaking the truth in love – as the psalmist tells us to do and God calls us to do – all the time, including this time! Amen

1. Eugene Peterson, *The Message: Psalm 15*, NAVPRESS:2002, p.924 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Catherine Rampell, “Covid-19, vaccine hesitancy, and the misinformation conundrum”, *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2021, p.A23 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Beacon Press:1976, p.55 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, 1929, 1957, 1980, p.47 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)