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**SUNDAY: Ordinary 4**

**SERMON: Home-Grown Prophets**

Text(s): Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:16-30

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Someone with an appropriate dose of cynicism defined politics as “the art of lying in as truthful a manner as possible.” If you’ve been following the news out of Washington over the past few weeks (and I’m not suggesting that you should, necessarily, since it’s not a particularly edifying way to pass the time), you will undoubtedly have heard many utterances from the mouths of both Administration and Congressional leadership that would push you in the direction of accepting that rather unflattering definition of politics.

Questions of truth are dominating our national public discourse these days. What is the truth about why we invaded Iraq? Were the American people deliberately lied to? The trial of Lewis Libby is all about who lied and who told the truth about leaking the identity of CIA operative Valerie Plame and why. Former President Jimmy Carter’s new book on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is creating a firestorm, much of it hinging on whether the things he cites as facts are true or whether they are biased interpretations. The furor has resulted in the resignation of fourteen of the board members of the Carter Peace Center. Have they resigned because they find his moral faulting of Israel’s policies and actions untruthful or because they don’t want to hear the truth?

If our politicians don’t tell us “the whole truth and nothing but the truth” very often, I suspect that there are at least a couple of reasons. First, I doubt many are well-equipped for the task. Philosopher Sissela Bok pointed out in her 1978 book *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, that moral thinking and public discussion about the issues of truth and falsehood, occupied a central place in philosophy, politics and religion from the ancient Greeks up through the Middle Ages. Since then, however,

virtually nothing has been written on the subject. Questions of truth and falsehood have virtually disappeared from public discourse and philosophical thinking. In fact, she said, when she began work on her book, she searched the eight-volume *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and failed to find a single reference to the issue of truthfulness versus lying as a moral issue. I’m not entirely sure why such a crucial issue has fallen off the modern radar screen; no doubt, the reasons are manifold and complex. But if philosophical and moral discussions about truth and falsehood are not part of our public discourse, it’s not hard to understand why there is so much confusion about it.

The second reason, however, is easier to understand, though perhaps harder to accept; we really don’t want to hear the truth all that much. We really don’t want the truth about our personal lives— our weight problem, our irritating personal habits, our addictions, our dysfunctional relationships. Nor do we want it in our public life. We don’t want to hear that our entire economy is based on allowing ourselves to be sold a bill of goods— literally be sold more and more and more stuff, little of which we truly need. We moan about the effects of global warming, but are we really ready to muster the political will and the personal sacrifices such as accepting higher taxes for energy research or give up our addiction to gas-guzzling cars, or anything else that would be required of us to ensure a more just and sustainable world? When Al Gore named his Power Point presentation on global warming *An Inconvenient Truth*, he chose an apt title. Truth is very often inconvenient. Which is why we are so easily seduced by convenient lies.

Our preference for the comfortable lie also explains our dislike of prophets. Do you know anyone who really likes a prophet? We’re OK with prophets as long as they’re prophesying against the other guy. But the trouble with prophets, is that eventually, they skewer us as well with their inconvenient truths. The human race has a long track record of dealing with prophets, and it’s not a pretty one. They haven’t

fared very well on the whole. There's a reason why in all the accounts in the Bible of people being called by God to the vocation of a prophet, there's been a lot of resistance on the part of the one being called. Moses tried his best to get out of God's call as he stood before the burning bush. I once saw a cartoon in a magazine. It showed Moses standing on Mt. Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments from God. Moses is saying to God, "Are you sure you can't tell them, 'Honor thy father and thy mother and thy prophet?'" Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos— none of them wanted to be prophets. And who could blame them. Prophets usually didn't have an expectation of a long life. People often stoned them for telling the truth, if that truth was so uncomfortable as to be intolerable, if it demanded real change or real social transformation, a real sacrifice, a real end to injustice. Or they got crucified. Or, in our own day, discredited by the media or assassinated. Think of those whose fate we have witnessed within our own lifetimes: Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany, Ghandi in India, Archbishop Romero in El Salvador, Martin Luther King, Jr. here in the United States.

In both of our lessons this morning, there is an assumption that there is such a thing as truth, and that people like us need to hear the truth and know the truth and be conformed to the truth if life is to be what God intended it should be. That, in fact, is the vocation of a prophet—to be an agent of the transformation of the world by telling the truth, and to tell it whether or not people want to hear it. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "*You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free.*" But I rather think the late Jamie Buckingham caught the implications of that statement correctly when he wrote a book entitled, *The Truth Will Make You Free, But First It Will Make You Miserable*. And since none of us wants to be miserable, we steer clear of whatever part of the truth is likely to make us feel that way.

The Word of God comes to Jeremiah and

calls him to be a truth-teller in the public arena. "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations. . . Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.*"

Now that is a powerful calling, and an enormous responsibility—to pluck up and to plant, to demolish and to build. That's what the truth does when it is allowed to enter the arena of public discourse. It tears down all the edifices that are built upon cleverly packaged lies. It demolishes the social structures and institutions that oppress people. It liberates those enslaved by propaganda. It lets the light shine into the darkness. But truth is not ultimately destructive, but constructive; after tearing down the edifices of falsehood, it rebuilds structures and institutions that are just and life-affirming and freeing in place of those which are unjust, soul-killing and oppressive. Truth is powerful.

Little wonder then, that Jeremiah is so reluctant to accept that vocation to be a public truth-teller, a prophet. And with good reason! If we were to read further in this book, we'd find that Jeremiah's truth-telling was so poorly received by those whose power was built on lies, that they dumped him down a dry well and left him there till he was nearly at the point of death. And only when the lies upon which the political life of the kingdom of Judah was built had led to their ultimate end of national defeat and internal political paralysis did the people decide that perhaps it was time to try the truth instead, and Jeremiah was rescued and rehabilitated. Like prophets in our own time, recognition of the truth of the prophet's message most often only comes after the truth has, in the popular idiom, "jumped up and bit them on the bottom."

Jesus also discovered the dangers of telling the truth in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his public ministry.

The first reaction of his relatives and neighbors was favorable. When he announced his vocation in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor, to open the eyes of the blind, to set the captives free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,*" St. Luke says that "*all spoke well of him, and all wondered at the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth.*" We can see it now. The *Nazareth Times Record* carried a front-page picture and the headline, "Hometown boy makes good." People are proud of him. He gives them visibility. They know his parents and his family. This feeling of community pride lasts all of about one minute, however, just until he begins telling them the truth about themselves. When he quotes an old proverb reminding them of their less-than-magnificent record of honoring the prophets who have told them the truth, and suggests that people they normally despise or ignore as outsiders might be living more truthfully than they are, their pride turns to fury. How dare he imply that there is anything wrong with them? Luke says that they are so enraged that actually try to murder Jesus by throwing him off the cliff on which the town is built.

Is that so surprising to us? It shouldn't be, not with the fate of our own contemporary prophets being what it has been. When our life is built upon convenient lies, when we've got our house of cards all neatly decorated, and our illusions of security so well in place that it allows us to sleep peacefully at night, if someone knocks down the house of cards, the rage boils up quickly. Why? Because ultimately, we're afraid. We're afraid of having to change. We're afraid that our own prejudices, assumptions, moral and ethical compromises, and our wealth that insulates us so well will be exposed to the light of truth for the illusions they are. And none of us wants that. Exposing our comfortable illusions will make us miserable. And fear is what fuels rage. If we're not afraid, we don't get angry. Anger is always linked to fear. And if what we

fear is the truth, then anger escalates into uncontrollable rage.

Thomas Merton wrote, "*We make ourselves real by telling the truth. [We] can hardly forget that [we] need to know the truth, for the instinct to know is too strong in us to be destroyed. But [we] can forget how badly [we] also need to tell the truth. We cannot know truth unless we ourselves are conformed to it.*"<sup>1</sup>

And that's the real tragedy of our tolerance of, and preference for, the convenient lie. We become incapable of knowing the truth when we see it. It's like being in the funhouse at the circus and looking into those curved mirrors at our own image. We see ourselves with enormously long skinny legs or with grossly short and fat bodies. The mirror is distorted and skewed, so it can never reflect back to us a true image of ourselves. So when the neatly packaged lie becomes the basis of public life and discourse, we can never recognize either the good for what it really is, or evil for what it really is.

"*We must dare to think what we mean and simply make clear statements of what we intend,*" says Merton, "*That is our only serious protection against repeated spiritual defilements by the slogans and programs of the unscrupulous.*"

And that is exactly what we, the Church, are called to be, a community where we encourage one another to think what we mean and speak plainly and truthfully about what we intend. It's no accident, I think, that all the great prophets have emerged from living faith communities. Trying to recognize and live by the truth in a world that prefers the convenient and expedient lie is nearly impossible by ourselves. We need to be part of a community where there is a common commitment to seeking and living by the truth. The church must be a community where truth is valued, where lies are exposed for what they are, where we can dare, as St. Paul says, to "*speak the truth in love,*" in order to

build one another up and “*to grow up in every way into Christ.*”

We cannot learn to tell the truth to the world, either individually or collectively unless we can first learn to tell the truth to ourselves and to one another within the community of faith. And if we cannot learn to be truthful people here in a community where we proclaim that all of us are fully accepted by God, despite our shortcomings, then where will we ever learn to tell the truth? It’s here, in such an atmosphere of acceptance, that we must recover the sanctity of speech, and learn how to make the tough, but ultimately liberating moral choices that God’s truth demands.

That is our calling, as it was the calling of Jeremiah and Jesus— to speak and live the truth in a world that prefers to live by the lie. One of my favorite plays is George Bernard Shaw’s “St. Joan.” In it, there’s a scene where the young King Charles is complaining to Joan of Arc because she has rebuked him for his moral cowardice in the face of his powerful ministers who are intriguing with the English enemy. He has no desire to be a hero; he just wants a quiet, comfortable life. He petulantly cries out, “I want to be just what I am. Why can’t you mind your own business and let me mind mine?” Joan replies to this outburst, “Because minding your own business is like minding your own body. It’s the shortest way to make yourself sick. What is my business? Helping mother at home. What is thine? Petting lap dogs and sucking sugar sticks. I tell thee, it is God’s business we are here to do; not our own. I have a message to thee from God; and thou must listen to it though thy heart break with the terror of it.”

Joan was right; we’re here to do God’s business, not our own. And we can only do that by learning to know and to tell the truth. If we will commit ourselves to search together for the truth, and to begin to live the truth in our lives and in our relationships, we will discover that the way it makes us feel miserable is really just a

brief moment on the way to something infinitely more durable and lasting— real freedom.

1. Thomas Merton, “Sincerity,” No Man Is An Island, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955.