

January 26, 2020
Matthew 5:1-12
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Blessed are the Truth-tellers

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Today's reading comes from the gospel of Matthew. In many ways Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses. Just as Moses went up the mountain to receive wisdom from God, in today's reading Jesus goes up the mountain to share wisdom from God. Moses received what we call the ten commandments whereas Jesus shared what we call the Beatitudes. Through Moses we received wisdom about how to live together in community. Through Jesus we are blessed with spiritual wisdom about the complexity of that human community.

Generally, when people "count their blessings," they usually name good things – good health, good family, good education, good job. So, Jesus' list of beatitudes catches us by surprise. Let us hear.

SERMON

Have you ever played two truths and a lie? A person makes three statements – two are true and one is a lie – and you have to guess which is the lie. It's a fun way to get to know more about people. So, here goes.

- I went to Andover-Newton seminary
- I played field hockey in college
- I needlepoint Christmas stockings

The lie is Andover-Newton. I went to Princeton Seminary.

We tell our children we want them to tell the truth - always. Until they point out something in our own behavior that embarrasses us. When our girls were young, I had conversations with them about the complexity of mother-daughter relationships. How very mature of me!

Then one day, when we were having a verbal tussle and I was getting upset, one of them said to me, "Oh, it's a mother-daughter thing!" and turned and walked away. First, I regretted giving her that verbal argument. Then I got a grip on myself; took a few deep breaths; and recognized that indeed she was right.

Truth telling is not always as easy as it sounds. And telling one kind of truth is not always the faithful response in the face of an opposing underlying untruth. For example, thank God for the people who lied protecting runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad. Or those who lie today to protect people who are the victims of domestic violence. In these cases, there is an underlying truth of injustice that calls for falsehoods in the moment. Ultimately you have to go with God's truth.

In the gospel of John, Jesus says,
*You will know the truth,
and the truth will make you free.*

Truth telling is at the heart of a life of spiritual integrity. Truth telling requires that we discern the difference between God's truth and legal truth. Truth telling requires us to hear other people's truths as well as to state our own. Truth telling calls us deeper and deeper onto the Way of Jesus of Nazareth, who, although it is not included in the Beatitudes, I can imagine saying

*Blessed are the truth-tellers,
For they will set you free.*

The people of Australia are painfully coming face to face with the truth of the devastating wildfires that are destroying whole regions of their country. Some of their political leaders can no longer hide behind stances of denying climate change. Facing the truth of what is actually happening has the power to set them free to take the necessary actions for a better long-term future.

The truth will set us free. Ignoring the truth will keep us in bondage. There are many things that can keep us in bondage and ignoring the truth is one of them. One of the central salvation stories in scripture is God's saving work in liberation from bondage. The story of Moses and the Exodus depicts God's saving work in liberating the Hebrews. But this is not just a story of long ago. It depicts God's commitment to liberating humanity from the bondage of believing slavery is acceptable.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus recognizes the truth that sometimes it is in our own vulnerability – or in attending to the vulnerability of others - that we come most directly in contact with God's grace.

This vulnerability leads us to have compassion for one another.

For example, many of our neighbors are vulnerable in unjust ways. In our last presidential election, many people voted the truth of their experience of being working class Americans who are increasingly disenfranchised by the political, economic and academic elite in our country. Our national GDP may be fine, but many Americans can no longer support a family on jobs that are present in their communities. In fact many of the jobs, especially manufacturing jobs, are simply gone - all so we can have cheaper consumer goods.

Is this really what we want? – cheap goods to stuff in our closets and storage units, while our neighbors can't put food on the table. As a living wage has gone down for many, we have seen an alarming rise in the rate of deaths of despair (suicide, drug overdoses).

The truth will set us free.

Stretching the truth, reframing the truth has always been a part of political expediency, yet we seem to have entered a whole new arena when it comes to truth telling in politics and in social media. What kind of an ethical environment are we creating for our children and our children's children? What kind of a moral environment are they creating for themselves on social media? The truth is we are all on shaky ground.

We are in the midst of the third impeachment process in my lifetime. All of them have been about abuse of power and then lying to cover it up. There was the

spying on the other party's headquarters, sexual misconduct with an employee, and now manipulating a foreign power for personal gain. We have three branches of government precisely to hold each other accountable; so the president is not simply free to use power in anyway s/he desires. As the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court presides over the Senate trial of the president, we see all three branches together. And in November we add our voices to the mix.

Indeed, truth telling is not as easy as it first sounds. Yet there is no avoiding the moral call to the truth. Our children are watching us. Our children are learning to tell the truth and to lie, right now. What they learn from us and from one another will shape generations to come. May we listen for God's truth. May we follow in the Way of Jesus, living up to his call to us which follows the Beatitudes:

*You are the light of the world.
Let your light shine.*