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“Truthiness” – Rev Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Ephesians 4, John 6

Back in 2006, Webster’s Dictionary added a new word to their lexicon. The word was actually created by the satirist and television star Stephen Colbert, who was exceptionally effective in calling people to action through his work on *The Colbert Report*. The word that was added was “**Truthiness**”. Colbert defines *truthiness* as: “*The quality by which one purports to know something emotionally or instinctively, without regard to evidence or intellectual examination.*”¹ On his show, Colbert would sometimes talk about something being true because his gut, his feelings, tell him it is true. I would just add that in his life outside *The Colbert Report*, and before he takes over for David Letterman in September, he is a teacher of catechism for his Catholic Church in South Carolina. He donates thousands of dollars to charity and does many hours of volunteer work for his church and other organizations.

Now that the first debate has happened for the presidential election *a year and a half from now*, I am not really sure I need to go into detail what *truthiness* is all about. We see it all the time when people are passionate about their politics and what they believe, regardless of where one identifies on the spectrum. We see people do it with their faith quite often, too. Because I feel something, because I care about what I thought about this particular thing, it has to be true, because I thought it and felt it and care about it. This is *truthiness*. We all do it. It is a terrible way of beginning a discussion because it often ends the discussion, and presumes most discussions are instead arguments to be won.

Truthiness is a problem for the crowd Jesus is dealing with today. Jesus is trying to teach them about who he is and why he is that way and how it is different from what they have known. But the Jewish people in the crowd are having nothing of it. They say, “*Isn’t that Jesus, the kid of Joe and Mary? You know, Joe and Mary down the way there? I don’t get how he can say he came down from heaven when we were all right here when he was born to Mary. By the way, why was he born in a manger?*” The ordinariness of Jesus’ earthly birth could not, in their minds, allow for the extraordinary claims Jesus was now making. Or, what they knew could not allow for what they were just learning and coming to know.

¹ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=truthiness&defid=1904540>, accessed 080815.

There is a new study out about ‘experts’, people who know a lot about a narrow area of knowledge². An expert would someone like a scientist who studies the rocks and the formations of rock in the Northeast coastal areas. Or someone who is a modern historian of Iranian history. Or someone who has gotten a PhD in the early church fathers’ reactions to the Gnostic movement of the first 400 years of the Christian church. Experts are often brought onto TV to offer ‘balance’ or ‘expert opinion’ on a particular matter in the world. Sometimes, pastors are experts, but it is really hard to know in what exactly. Anyway, what this new study found out is that most experts feel compelled or are willing to speak beyond their area of expertise into other areas of knowledge related to their own. What the study found is the ‘experts’ are more often than not profoundly wrong about what they have to say outside their particular area of study. They, to be perfectly blunt, just made stuff up and hoped the authority their expertise carries would make you believe what they said to be true.

As an example, a biologist who studies bacteria may feel compelled to speak up on global warming. An expert on early Christian heresy may feel like they have something to say about Islamic fringe groups. A minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ may feel she has something profoundly informative about a particular political situation in the world or country. This study suggests that experts are some of the worst practitioners of *truthiness*. It is true because I know something about a particular thing and since what you are saying *feels wrong* and what I think about what you said *feels true*, I must be right because I feel it to be true.

So before we try to discredit the crowd in our story today, I would just remind all of us that we are all prone to making statements out of *truthiness*. I would even go so far as to say that *truthiness* is the default form of discussion in the public square in America today. How can I say that? Because it feels right to me. Doesn’t it to you?

Now what? Imagine you were in the crowd listening to Jesus. There is what you know, or rather, what you think you know about your tradition and your history and what you have learned; and then there is what Jesus is telling you. Worse, he is emphatic about what he is trying to teach you. He says it five times in three different ways: “*I am the bread of life*”, he says; “*I am the bread of heaven that came down from heaven*”, he says; “*I am the living bread*”, he says. When we think we know a little, we think we know a lot, and that makes it very hard for truth to be communicated well. The crowd with Jesus today are having a hard time accepting something they do not know or understand. The next verse right after our reading for today is “*The Jews then disputed among themselves...*” (6:52).

² <http://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-07-self-proclaimed-experts-vulnerable-illusion-knowledge.html>, accessed 080815. It should be noted that the study does not *necessarily* mean fully-accredited experts. It designates anyone who believes themselves to be an expert. But the point still holds up. We are all self-proclaimed experts in some particular field.

The ‘truth’, such as it is, is not a soft, cozy, comforting thing. More often than not, truth creates conflict. Arguments happen when it is spoken or expressed. The Gospel of John is a constant reminder of how divisive the truth of Jesus is for communities. Contrary to what we might want or wish, spiritual truths are hard to hear. Truths about who we are or how we are acting are hard to hear. Truths about our environment or our money or our government are hard to hear. Arguments happen. Conflict occurs. Jesus knows this, and Paul, the person who is assumed to have written Ephesians, though there are questions there, knows this, too.

Once we have accepted the truth of Jesus as the foundation of our faith and life, as the primary nourishment of our spirit and soul, how will we deal with it? How will we deal with it especially with each other, those of us who have covenanted and at least appear to believe in a single point of truth with one another? Clearly, the Ephesians aren’t dealing with the new truth in Christ they have committed to very well, otherwise Paul would not have felt obligated to tell them how to deal with it. If we presume to know what is going on with the Ephesians, it sounds like there are conflicts in the church and they are arising because people are acting out of *truthiness* – there are those who believe they are experts in the faith and actually know very little about anything at all. But it feels right so they are going with their gut.

Paul had to deal with this with the Corinthians as well. There, he has to tell them in 1 Corinthians 13, “*Now, you see through a mirror darkly. Now, you know only in part.*” Let’s go through these verses in Ephesians briefly to see how Paul calls the Ephesians to deal with conflicts that arise from speaking truth.

Paul begins by saying, “Therefore...”. The ‘therefore’ refers to remembering you are a new person in Christ, to be renewed in the spirit of the mind, and to remember you are now created after the likeness of God (4:22-24), and that truth resides in Jesus (4:23). We are now people who derive our spiritual nourishment from the bread and body of Christ, the living bread which gives life to all.

“*Therefore, having put away all falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another*” (4:25). How are we going to have a conversation about truthful things with one another in our faith community? How will we talk with others outside these walls? Since we are new people in Christ, it is in our best interest to not make stuff up anymore. Don’t try to create universal presumptions about other people’s experience. Instead, simply speak the truth. In counseling classes and in pastoral training, we are taught to make “I” statements. “*I believe...*”, “*I think...*”, “*It seems to me...*”, “*The truth to me is...*”. We can only speak truth to one another if we have respect for the person with whom we are communicating; we can only receive the truth from someone if we also see the dignity of that person.

“*Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...*” (4:26). This is so interesting to me. This is very advanced psychology here. Paul is saying to the Ephesians that, since you are speaking truthfully to one another, your neighbor, your friend, your fellow Christian, is going to get angry. You are going to get angry. So be angry, but don’t let your anger dictate your behavior. Do not sin. Do no harm to the other person. Isn’t that scary and freeing at the same time? And then he says *do not let the sun go down on your anger*. I read this to mean, “*Don’t go to bed angry.*” Work out the issue or the problem. To hold onto it, to instead crush the anger inside of yourself, is to “*give opportunity to the devil*”. In other words, Satan will use your anger against you and others. Don’t let him.

A little later, Paul says, “*Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouth, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear*” (4:29). Remember, we are seeking to avoid *truthiness* in our talk with one another and out in the world. Paul has just told us to speak only what is true to one another. Don’t make stuff up. Then he has told us that when the truth is unsettling and causes conflict – because it will since that is what truth does – to let your anger be present, but don’t let your anger give you a foothold for Satan to take advantage of it. Now, he tells us that when we finally do speak, only say things that build up the other person. Do not denigrate, shame, belittle, undermine or undercut, compare, presume or in any other way diminish the dignity of the other person. Speak only to what has happened or is of concern, not beyond it. Our goal is always to bring the grace of God and Christ to the situation. There is an unspoken corollary here that is very hard – well, it is hard for me: If you cannot build the other person up, and if the way you are about to speak truth to your neighbor in any way will be against the dignity of that neighbor, then your best course of action might be, at that moment, to say nothing at all.

If we are not doing these things, if we let *truthiness* rule the day, then we “*grieve the Holy Spirit...by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption*” (4:30). Then, under the category of how to speak truth to one another, how to have a conversation with one another in a Christian way, Paul says, “*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice*” (4:31).

This is all hard work. Hearing the truth and speaking the truth are not easy. What makes it hard is we easily let go of the nature of Christian truth. That truth is we have accepted a relationship with Jesus as the ground and foundation of our truth. As a result, we drink from living, changing waters, and living, changing bread. A truth that comes from a relationship is not the same as facts from measurements and methodical research in concrete things. We are changed people, a new person in Christ who has been renewed in the spirit of the mind and put on a new self. Sometimes, we don’t fit well in that new skin. Sometimes, we see the world from that old place. Sometimes, we just

want to be right. We don't want to be that new person in Christ. Even so, we rely on the bread of life to lead us. He is what we have committed to, we covenant with one another to be led by him as a church.

That relationship with Jesus, that reliance upon the living, changing relationship with Jesus, changes what we know about ourselves and others, and changes the foundations of our understanding. The relationship should change how we speak truth to one another. We are able to speak truth and, as Paul says, "*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you*" (4:32). In this way, we are "*imitators of God, as beloved children*" (5:1). In this way, "*we walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice for God*" (5:2).

And so, since we are living out of the truth of our relationship with Christ, rather than the *truthiness* of what we think we know, we seek to rely on Jesus, the bread of life. Once we understand that our understanding will never be enough to understand even ourselves, much less other people, and once we know we will never have enough knowledge to know even just our small area of expertise, then we can begin to humble ourselves and rely on the source of all understanding, knowledge, truth and strength, Jesus Christ. Then, in truth, we will always want the living bread of Jesus Christ in our lives at every moment.

Amen.