

Believe it or not, the other day, I had a reasonable interaction on Facebook. Really! I know, many of you are already thinking this is a made up story. But hand to God, I swear this actually happened. I posted something about how devastating our political discourse has become and how there are some things we need to do to get on the path to true healing. Someone responded with a sort of milquetoast comment about how love is the answer, and if we just love each other enough, it'll all get better. Well, I stewed on that for a couple of days because, on the one hand, sure, love is great. It's kind of a big deal for us Christians, but it's also just not enough on it's own. I didn't want to pick a fight, but y'all, someone on the internet was wrong! So, I responded and said that, while love is a necessary component of healing, we also need truth to win out. There, I could dust off my hands and pat myself on the back. World. Saved. Another day later, the same commenter responded to my claim that we need truth to win out. All they said was, "Yes, we do." Hooray! We agreed! On the Internet, no less!

Now, that may not seem like a terribly notable moment, or even like a terribly good way to start a sermon, but here's what you don't know. The person who responded believes things about this world that are very different from what I believe. They get their news from sources I think are dubious; they believe Democrats are kidnapping children to do nefarious things; they think Republicans have turned their back on their beloved leader; and they think the president is a flawed man, but a flawed man chosen by God to lead our country out of its depravity. Where our Facebook interaction ended, is still surprising to me, because we agreed on something. At least, we agreed on something...at the surface. We agreed that what our world needs so desperately right now is truth. Real, verifiable, unfiltered truth. But the more I think about it, we're still disagreeing in the part that's been left unsaid. And that is that what I think is true and what they think is true are not the same thing. In other words, I think the world would be better off if they would recognize my point of view as true and theirs as a lie. And they think I've been hoodwinked and desperately need to have the scales fall from my eyes. Turns out we don't actually agree all that much underneath a simple, innocuous comment like "Yes, we do need truth."

But that's not news. We all know our country is divided and that different sources of news play a significant role in that division. But what's interesting is that, if I can look beyond our incredibly deep division, at least with this particular commenter (and I'm guessing a lot more like them), if I can look beyond the division, there's a lot we share. For one thing, we are both Christian. Different kinds of Christian, sure, but we share a belief in Christ. And that's not nothing. But also, we share a value in love. They want to love me, even though we believe differently. Maybe it's because they like me and disagree, or maybe it's because they're trying to live into the whole "love your enemy" thing. And if it's the latter, great! Because they're still trying to live into our shared words of Christ. On top of that, we both hold truth in high regard, a necessity to living peaceably and healing our world. Sure, we look at it differently (don't worry, we'll come back to that), but we both value the concept. We're both disgusted by lies told with the goal of manipulating. Jesus says "the truth shall set us free," so again, we're finding commonality in our faith.

But truth is a tough thing. In one of the most infamous philosophical exchanges in scripture, Jesus says, "I came into this world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to me." And Pontius Pilate responds with a question forefront in my own mind: "What is truth?" If there's a question of our age, that's it. And what worries me is that our entire world, or at least two people talking on Facebook, has taken the role of Pilate, staring at the brokenness, shrugging our shoulders, and wondering what truth even is anymore. It's a wild thing feeling like a conspiracy theorist just for saying what I know to be true.

Now, I've always loved the call story of Nathanael, mostly because of how clearly he wears his prejudice on his sleeve. When Philip tells him he's found the Messiah and he's a redneck, Nathanael sneers and says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" That backwater town? Have you seen the t-shirts they wear? I love Nathanael's call because it's so true. I know how quickly I am to judge people based off of what they look like and, more than I'd like to admit, where they're from. We all do to an extent, even the more civilized of us. But in spite of it, Jesus opens his arms and welcomes him. The truth of Christ is there, right in front of him, but it takes some doing to see beyond his own view of how the world works to see it.

And little Samuel isn't all that different. He's in the temple when God speaks to him, and he can't understand that it's God. Think about that. He is in THE place where people expect to encounter God, and even then, it doesn't make sense to him. God speaking to him, of all people, doesn't fit his understanding of how the world works, so he runs for help. And it's only when Eli tells him what to do that it clicks. The truth of God is there, right in front of him, but it takes some doing to hear it.

Even Paul gets at this. Whether or not something is lawful or unlawful is not the point. What matters is what you do with your body and how that affects the people you're in community with. Your body is a temple, but guess what? So is your neighbor's. Maybe don't beat your neighbor with a fire extinguisher and a flag. The truth is God seeks to expose the sacredness within you, but because we are what we are, that always takes some doing. But the truth is there, in you, in your neighbor, and in God.

But, the search for truth cannot be equivocating. Truth is not negotiable. Things happen or they don't. We can debate motivations, we can argue the benefits of outcomes, but we can't argue reality. To hold truth in high regard means each one of us has to accept disappointment from time to time. It means naming what really happened, not a partisan version. And y'all, that takes some doing. It means recognizing that sometimes, the side we're on gets things wrong. That's not weakness, and it's not necessarily shameful. It is, simply, truth.

Now, I know that a lot of people across time have used their religion, a lot of people have used Christianity as a justification for how they deploy truth. Or claim that the truth in God somehow supersedes the truth of this world. So, I say this with all the care I can muster. We find our truth in God, absolutely. We look for that truth of God in the darkness, in the temple, in our conversations with power, in the face of our enemies, in the prejudiced, and in the faithful. Yes, absolutely. But also, we listen to, even promote the truth of the secular world, too. Because truth either is or it is not.

There's something else to Samuel that's almost as challenging as recognizing God in the first place. And that's his response. When God calls him, Samuel says, "Speak, for your servant is listening." But I think most modern Christians, and maybe most Christians across time, have gotten this wrong. I think what we actually do when we come to God or God comes to us, I think what we actually say instead is "Listen, for your servant is speaking." We got it backwards. Rather than opening ourselves to the hard truths God has to tell us, we want God to listen up, 'cause we've got a thing or two to say. And sure, we can take our needs to God, of course. But prayer isn't a one-way street. We need to get ourselves out of the way and listen. Listen for God and listen for truth. And I think if we get in the habit of praying in this way, speaking when we must but listening first, I think we can take that practice with us into the world. Maybe as we listen for God's truth a little more we'll actually get better at hearing more truth. Maybe if we stop gabbing over God, we'll get better at listening.

And maybe, in all that, maybe truth actually begins to grow. Maybe truth can be heard more and more. Maybe a few more people at a time, maybe an extra Facebooker here and there, maybe we all see true truth for what it is, and "alternative facts" for the deception they are. I have to believe in the deepest part of my being that, while we are desperately divided over what the world even is, I have to believe that we still share something. The search for truth seems to be one of those places, but it takes some doing to find it. But when we do, I pray we listen.