

Pentecost XIV (20A)
Genesis 45.1-15/Psalm 133/Romans 11.1-2a; 29-36 /Matt. 15.21-28
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
17 August 2008

I AM JOSEPH: ON TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

~Paul H. Friesen~

This morning, through the Scriptures, God asks us to consider together two wonderful things: *truth* and *reconciliation*.

We shouldn't have been surprised that a church leader, the Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was chosen to lead a *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in the 1990s after racial *apartheid* collapsed in South Africa. Those who degraded, damaged, or even killed others were to be forgiven if they told the truth about what they did—that is, if they confessed it aloud.

It's not surprising that the Canadian Churches are now called on to support that other 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' that is just now starting to inquire into the lives of Native Canadians caught up in the devastating Residential School system of their youth.

And it's all because speaking the truth to others and living in reconciliation with them have always been signs of vital faith, of true religion. It's not that Christians always speak the truth and live in perpetual reconciliation.

But Christians know they have a desperate need to give and receive both these things, no matter how far they have wandered off course. It's in our spiritual DNA, whether or not we try to ignore it. And it's infectious. The more truth, the more reconciliation, the more it's impossible to slip out the door un-truthful and un-reconciled.

Our Scriptures speak of a very different kind of truth than what a politician means when he says that he must be honest and truth compels him to say that he must reverse his election pledges—when it's all about remaining in power. The Scriptures speak of a very different kind of truth than what a celebrity means when he says the truth is that he no longer loves his wife, and so he has, for instance, moved in with his children's nanny whom he truly loves.

The truth in both cases is that they have abandoned their promises, and failed those who trusted them. They have not yet started down the road to reconciliation because they haven't yet really spoken the truth. They haven't accepted responsibility for the truth. And the truth is that all of us, in less spectacular ways have done the same.

On the other hand this is a very different kind of truth than what is really gossip, i.e. facts about others retold, not to help anyone in particular, but retold, really, for the benefit of the collector and retailer of the gossip. And it's a very different kind of truth from speaking aloud whatever happens to be passing through our heads, which is really our own gossip about ourselves.

That is to say, to speak aloud every fleeting, negative impression of others or to mention aloud every petty dislike is not bold or truthful, or helpful. In Scripture it is simply careless, or self-indulgent. Truth is a much bigger thing; it is not a trifling matter.

So, what is the truth? It is not a collection of carefully selected facts told to give us an advantage in a certain situation. Truth is told because it has to be told. And when it is spoken aloud, it brings with it the seeds of reconciliation.

Who can deny the beauty of the images of reconciliation, the pictures of living in unity that the poet of the Psalms gives to us? To live in unity is to feel the enormous goodness of God.

Reconciliation is a gift from the hand of God. To live as reconciled people is to know God is gracious to us, and is to feel this divine grace as surely as the grass on Mount Hermon is drenched by its famous, heavy, nightly dew. To live as reconciled people is to know God is gracious to us, and is to feel this divine grace as surely as Aaron felt the gallons of olive oil pouring over his head and soaking his beard on the day of his consecration as High Priest.¹

But how do we 'get to reconciliation'?

We do it by speaking the truth. Lies are a lot of work, as we all know, and they become more and more work and that exhaust us the more they are maintained, as the comedies and tragedies in the theatre and in real life always remind us. Telling the truth, on the other hand, might feel quite difficult, but it gets easier and in the end it leads to relief, and finally to peace, to reconciliation.

We have two wonderful stories about this; the story of Joseph and his brothers, and the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman.

Joseph—what a story is told in the book of *Genesis*! No one could invent a better tale about truth and reconciliation.

¹ Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001), p. 315, and Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1983), p. 215.

Joseph was his father's favourite, the son of his first wife. Joseph aroused the jealousy and hatred of his brothers. He was sold into slavery by them, he was lied about by them, and his brothers made out to their father that he must be dead. In Egypt lies were told about him by his master's wife, but he prospered and gained high office. And then after years Joseph finally met and recognized his tormentors, and before they knew who he was gave them a bit of their own—he played with their minds. The full story precedes this chapter.

But finally we hear those great words: "Then Joseph could no longer control himself. He had to face and confess the truth.

First, the emotional truth hit him: We hear that 'he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it.' Joseph had carefully ushered out his servants and staff, but it didn't matter. Everybody knew.

Joseph, the vice-regent was facing his past.

And then he had to speak it out loud, and he did. 'Joseph said to his brothers. "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.'" It had to be said. So the truth was spoken.

And then Joseph relays the bigger truth that came out of his suffering, and allowed him to forgive them: 'Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves.' Why? He repeats the bigger truth three times.

'God sent me before you to preserve life.' And 'God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth.' And again, 'So, it was not you who sent me here, but God.' And he has to say it yet again to his brothers, a few years later, after their father dies—you meant it all for harm, God turned it to good.

It seems as if Joseph is just realizing as the minutes unfold how enormous the truth is that began with those simple words, 'I am Joseph.' It couldn't have happened unless he had taken the first step in truth-telling. God, he realized and he confessed, was making his life to be an even greater bridge of reconciliation—the whole clan would be re-united in Egypt, and would live in safety and plenty and prosper in spite of the dry winds that had brought drought across the Middle East.

Such greater, higher truth can't always be seen when we speak the truth, but truth is always carries the seeds of reconciliation.

In the Gospel, Jesus had slipped across the border, out of his native province, beyond the temple and the synagogues into pagan land, ancient

enemy land—land dominated by pagan shrines, land without the covenant of Jewish justice and restraints on the power of its kings. But it was a place of safe retreat while Jesus felt the net drawing close around him, as he prepared to face the truth of official religious opposition and his own quickly shortening life.²

But then there was the woman, the Canaanite woman, who came out of the blue, who broke through the circle of Jesus' handlers, who spoke the truth. 'Send her away', they said, 'send her away.' 'She keeps shouting after us!' But no matter how softly she might have spoken, it was the truth that was probably too loud for the disciples.

Actually, she spoke three truths in her repeated cry. 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' She spoke the truth. Jesus was a Son of David, he was from the tribe her ancestors despised. Jesus was a man of mercy, divine mercy. And her daughter was tormented.

Three truths; nothing but the truth.

Jesus was silent—but he did not send her away. He was silent. Then he spoke the truth. I am sent to my own people as God's bridge of reconciliation. And she spoke the truth; surely such mercy cannot be contained, it must be scattered, even by chance to the animals who lick the floor around the table. And he spoke the truth again: this mercy was that great, and she was ready to receive it, and she did. Her daughter was liberated.

As it was put by a famous theologian two years ago; 'This unknown Canaanite woman, not only becomes for us Gentiles the forerunner of our faith, but her reply to Jesus teaches us how to speak.'³ She teaches us how to speak—to speak the truths about God and about us that lead to reconciliation. As that theologian knew, and as we know, we still celebrate these truths in the words we will repeat at this Eucharist, truths still spoken in our liturgy two thousand years later.⁴

We all know how easy it is to leak out facts that put forward our own agenda and how hard it is to speak the truth that might seem to make us weak.

St. Paul knew this. He the Jewish Rabbi, who had met Christ, knew this. Neither Jews, nor Gentiles (that is, the rest of the world) had any bribe to offer God, any effort to make him forget the truth. So he repeated, in his

² R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p.592.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), p.? Sorry!

⁴ *Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: ABC, 1962), p. 83-84, and *Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: ABC, 1985), p. 246.

own paraphrase, the great truth from the ancient book of *Job*: ‘Who has given a gift to God, to receive a gift from him?’

The greatest truth reads the other way around: we have gifts to offer God and each other because everything in creation and every ounce of reconciliation possible is a gift from God.

Isn’t the truth a matter of emptying our hands of bribes that would justify our actions, and isn’t truth a matter of swallowing the words that would justify our ways to God and to each other?

During this liturgy we will have the wonderful opportunity to hear and repeat great truths, the truths that lead to reconciliation. But we will have all the opportunities we need as soon as the Eucharist is over—at coffee right here, as we walk, or ride the bus, or drive home, and all week long.

We’re not taught to look for opportunities to say something profound, or give voice to opinions best kept to ourselves, or to look like heroes of truth. It’s not all about others in the beginning—it’s first about ourselves, but not about justifying ourselves.

We are urged, by the mercy of God, to recognize the truth and to feel it, and to speak it simply, and to look for the reconciliation.

We might have meant harm—we often did—but God in his mercy can turn to good what has harmed us, and turn to good the harm we have done others.

This is the reconciliation that comes from the truth being spoken, and the truth heard.

Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. Thanks be to God for the faith of our ancestors, their gift to us. Thanks be to God for this community of faith, with the gift of truth and reconciliation to give to the world.

St. Paul said this to the troubled church in Corinth: ‘All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.’⁵

And so we begin by preparing to gather around the table of reconciliation.

Amen.

⁵ *II Corinthians* 5.18. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.