

“Telling the Truth”

a sermon by

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Text: “Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, ‘You are not also one of his disciples, are you?’ He denied it and said, ‘I am not’”. (John 18:25).

Several weeks ago there was a huge uproar concerning James Frey’s book, *A Million Little Pieces*, a story about Frey’s recovery from alcohol and drug addiction. Because it was one of the selections on the Oprah Winfrey Book Club, the book sold more than 3.5 million copies. Trouble occurred when an investigative Web site, entitled “Smoking Gun,” uncovered many of the details in Frey’s story that were exaggerated or simply not true. At first when Frey appeared on the “Larry King Live” show,” Oprah Winfrey defended Frey speaking of what she called the “truthiness” of the book. Later the talk show host lambasted Frey on her show and apologized to her readers for presenting the book as factual, when it was not.

The situation regarding James Frey is not an isolated incident. It is one that is very common today. In recent years, politicians and pundits, professors and even Pulitzer Prize winners have been caught dealing in deceit. One of the nation’s most highly regarded historians,

Stephen Ambrose, acknowledged that he had plagiarized portions of his work, as did Doris Kearns Goodwin.

The city of Charlotte has not been immune to this type of abuse. Several years ago a prominent young politician wrecked a promising career when it became obvious that he had padded his resume with things that were not true. In another incident, a prominent business leader lost his job after it was revealed that he not only claimed a college degree he had not earned, but that he had also misrepresented himself as an Olympic athlete, when he had not even participated in the Olympics.

I.

One of the distinctive characteristics of Jesus was his insistence on the truth. In the passage that I have read in John's gospel there is a distinct contrast between Jesus and Peter. On the night he was arrested, Jesus asked his captors whom they were seeking. They replied, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said, "I am he"(John 18:5).

The contrast, of course, is Peter, who, when asked if he were a disciple of Jesus, replied, "I am not."

That insistence on truth is found throughout the New Testament. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his disciples to let their "Yes" be "Yes" and their "No" to be "No" (Matthew 5: 37). The ethics of Jesus always goes beyond the literal. Jesus had an annoying way of pushing people beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law. Thus Jesus not only forbids adultery, but lust as well; not only killing, but anger too.

As Christians, we believe in the importance of truth. The ninth commandment is stated like this: "You shall not bear false witness." That is what lying is about. It is bearing false witness. It is saying what is not true. It is a failure to object to what is false.

II.

Somewhere along the way we have lost our way. Lynne Cheney, in her book *Telling the Truth*, speaks of the consequences of a postmodern world in which there is not "Truth" with a capital "T" but, rather a series of truths. Cheney writes, "We have moved beyond the common sense notion that people's descriptions of reality vary to the conclusion that there is no independent reality and thus no basis of making judgments about truth and falsehood." Thus it has become fashionable on many college and university campuses to speak of the truth claims of dominant groups. For example, when Tawana Brawley was not attacked by a group of whites as she had claimed, the Nation magazine reported that it didn't matter whether the charge was true, because it symbolized what happens to many people today.

Telling the truth, then, has become an endangered virtue in our society. In fact, there are many who regard it as irrelevant. For example, when Coach George O'Leary was hired by Notre Dame as the head football coach several years ago, and then fired the next day when it was

revealed that he had misrepresented himself on his resume, there were many angry football fans that criticized Notre Dame for being “self-righteous” in its attitude. One angry fan even argued that Coach O’Leary should not be judged on the basis of his integrity but on the basis of how many games he had won.

That is the perfect postmodern answer to lying: it is perfectly all right for a person to reinvent himself, but what we are is less important than what we appear to others.

III.

Nothing is more critical for us as a church, but also as a democratic society, than a love and respect for the truth. When Dean Rusk, who served as Secretary of State under President John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, retired from that office, he left all of his papers and personal notes at the state department. Rusk spent the rest of his life serving on the faculty of the University of Georgia. He was a person with very limited economic resources. I don’t believe it ever occurred to Dean Rusk that one could turn a job in public service into an economic sinecure, selling one’s memoirs, appearing on talk shows, and working for political action groups. I thought of that this past week when I saw the testimony of Michael Brown before the Senate subcommittee investigating the response of our government to Hurricane Katrina. Brown testified under oath that he did not report the broken levees in New Orleans to the director of Homeland Security because he didn’t think it would make any difference. Where is the truth in all of this? How is it possible that the United States government could be paralyzed in the face of the worst natural disaster in the history of this country? How is it possible that the House of Representatives would appoint Tom Delay to the subcommittee to investigate the Jack Abramoff scandal when one of the key people under investigation is Tom Delay?

When Robert Dole, a former United States Senator, spoke at the Novella Business Luncheon several years ago, he reminded his audience of President Calvin Coolidge, who was always remembered as a man of few words. In fact, his nickname was “Silent Cal.” Once when President Coolidge had been to church on a Sunday morning, he returned home to his wife, who had not been able to attend. “How was church?” his wife asked. “Fine,” said the President. “What did the minister preach about?” Mrs. Coolidge asked. The President replied, “He preached about sin.” “Well,” said his wife, “what did he say about it?” The President replied, “He said he was against it.”

As Bob Dole pointed out, Calvin Coolidge was a man of few words, but everyone who knew him understood that he was a man of his word and when he gave his word, people believed him.

IV.

There is another kind of truth with which we need to be concerned and that is the truth that as Christians we claim in Jesus Christ. Some years ago I came across a remarkable little book by Frederick Buechner, entitled *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. The Book had its beginning at the Lyman Beecher lectures on Preaching at the Yale

Divinity School. In this book, Buechner points out that above all else, the preacher is called to tell the truth. The truth, of course, turns out to be both tragic and comic. The tragedy is that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” The comic element is the grace of God, which does for us what we could not do for ourselves. The fairy tale aspect of the gospel is that in the end all the disguises are stripped away.

Buechner concludes with a call to preachers to tell the truth, to stretch our imaginations, to strain our credulity, and to make our jaws drop, because, as Buechner puts it, the sad joke of it is that if he does not, then of all the people he or she is almost the only one left now who does not. Scientists speak of intelligent life among the stars, of how at the speed of light time does not exist. Doctors speak seriously about life after death. The joke of all of this, Buechner notes, is that often it is the preacher, the steward of the greatest mystery of them all is the one who hangs back, prudent, cautious, hopelessly mature and wise to the last, even when no less than St. Paul reminds us to be a fool for Christ’s sake.

As Christians, we are called to proclaim the truth. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” But as Christians, we are also called to live lives that reflect integrity and truthfulness.

Several years ago I came across an article in *Sports Illustrated* by Rick Reilly in which he paid a tribute to his former coach, John Wooden, who for many years was the head basketball coach at UCLA. Reilly, wrote that sometimes during this time of year when the Madness of March gets to be too much, when there are too many players with out of wedlock children, too few freshmen who will not stay in school long enough to become men, too many coaches trying to be homeys and too few trying to become mentors, he goes back to visit his former coach.

There has never been a coach in college basketball quite like John Wooten. His teams won ten NCAA basketball championships, the last in 1975. No one has come within six of that record. He won 88 straight games between January 30, 1971, and January 17, 1974. No one has come within 42 of that record. But as Reilly notes, the most remarkable thing about Wooden was not his coaching ability, but his character: quiet as an April snow and square as a game of checkers; loyal to one woman, one school, one way. As the coach of UCLA, he would spend a half hour the first day of practice teaching his players how to put on a sock. “Wrinkles,” he noted, “can lead to blisters,” he would tell the players and they looked at each other and rolled their eyes. Of the 180 players who played for him, Wooden keeps up with about 172. If you played for him, you played by the rules: never score without acknowledging another player. One word of profanity and you were through for the day.”

John Wooden believed in the basics. No dribbling behind the back or through the legs. “There’s no need for it,” he said. He did not allow long hair or facial hair. “It takes too long to dry,” he said, “and you could catch a cold leaving the gym.” One day Bill Walton, the All American Center, showed up at practice with a full beard. “It’s my right,” said Walton. Wooden asked him if he believed that strongly. Walton said that he did. “That’s good, Bill,” Coach said. “I admire people who have strong beliefs and stick by them. I really do. We are going to miss you.” Walton shaved the beard off right then and there.

One of the most appealing aspects of Jesus was not only that he was the “Truth” but that he lived the truth. Surely, he expects no less of us.

Amen!