

When the truth hurts

Luke 4:21-30

January 31, 2010

Why are we afraid of the truth?

Because we're human ...

Because the truth hurts ...

Because it shatters our view of reality ...

Because it changes us ...

Because it makes us uncomfortable ...

Because we think we know everything already ...

Why are we afraid of the truth?

Because the truth is inconvenient. Because acknowledging the truth will cost us. Because acknowledging the truth will put at risk investments we have made in things as they are: investments of time and energy and money and emotional attachment.

Because the truth shines a light on us, a light that reveals us as we are, and we don't want to see ourselves as we are and we don't want anybody else to see us as we are.

Because the truth shines a light on the world, showing us things we don't want to see, making us aware of things we don't want to know. Because when we do see, we can no longer deny or ignore the hunger and pain, the unfairness and injustice. Because when we do know, we will have to take some responsibility for the world as it is.

The truth threatens the myths, the happy myths, that confirm our own sense of virtue and entitlement. Some of these are personal myths: that I am a good person, fair and unbiased, always putting others first, always doing all that is in my power to help other people. Some of these are national myths: that we are the world's sole protector of truth and freedom, that we are and are destined to be the strongest and the best and the most virtuous of all the nations.

We all have our strengths and our flaws, our virtues and our blind spots, just as our nation has its virtues and its sins. The truth makes us see ourselves in an honest light -- not to hurt or discredit, but to heal.

So why are we so afraid of the truth?

Prophets speak the truth ... out loud. They are compelled to speak the truth, by conscience, by personal experience, by God. And all prophets have at least three things in common.

When prophets speak the truth, they always speak on behalf of the little ones: people who are overlooked, ignored, oppressed, poor, sick, suffering.

And when prophets speak the truth, they always challenge the big guys: the powers that be, powers and authorities that are heavily invested in maintaining their own power and authority.

And finally, when prophets speak the truth, they get themselves in trouble. People don't want to hear the truth and the prophet pays a price -- persecution, rejection, imprisonment, death.

Our young folks named four modern prophets in their video.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Nazi SS on April 9, 1945. He was a German Christian, a pastor and teacher, who spoke the truth, warning his fellow countrymen as early as 1933 "against slipping into an idolatrous cult of the Führer (leader), who could very well turn out to be Verführer (seducer)." He urged the church to stand against the Nazi regime and to stand for the Jewish people. Deitrich Bonhoeffer was a prophet, and he paid the price.

Mahatma Gandhi was shot and killed by a Hindu nationalist on January 30, 1948. Gandhi spoke up for the rights of the poor and the rights of women, for the rights of the "untouchable" class and the rights of people of differing religious faiths. He spoke against the colonial domination of the Indian people by the British government. Mahatma Gandhi was a prophet, and he paid the price.

Martin Luther King was killed by an assassin's bullet in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968. Pastor King took up the cause of black Americans and poor Americans. He spoke out against discrimination and injustice and violence. He called his own nation to account for its actions, to acknowledge and atone for its own sins, its complicity with oppression and violence. Martin Luther King was a prophet, and he paid the price.

Oscar Romero was shot and killed by a right-wing death squad as he celebrated mass in a church in El Salvador. Convicted by his faith and spurred on by his commitment to serve the real needs of the people, he spoke out against the hurtful effects both of Marxism and capitalism. He defended the cause of the poor, and he urged resistance to the strong arm tactics of the Salvadoran government. Oscar Romero was a prophet, and he paid the price.

Jesus was a prophet. He was more than a prophet, but certainly nothing less than a prophet, and he paid the price, dragged to the edge of a cliff by his own townspeople.

When he met with them that Sabbath in the Nazareth synagogue, they were enamored with him ... at first. He read the text from the Isaiah scroll:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has chosen me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind;
to set free the oppressed
and announce that the time has come
when the Lord will save his people*

And then he said to them,

This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read ...

The people of Nazareth were impressed. Luke reports that they marveled at his eloquence. They were some of the “little ones,” poor, oppressed, suffering under the harsh rule of the Roman Empire. They had been waiting for years, for centuries, for God to keep the promise to David, for God to restore their nation, for God to save them. They would have to have been happy to hear Jesus proclaim that the day of salvation had arrived!

But I’m not convinced that’s what they were so excited about. Jesus was the item of the day, the talk of the countryside, the latest phenomenon. They had heard the stories about him being spread throughout the land like wildfire, and now they had opportunity to see him and hear him for themselves. “Let’s see what he’s got!” And, best of all, he was Joseph’s son! He was one of them! He was their guy! This was their moment to shine!

But God's agenda was different from their agenda. God had a deeper and broader purpose in mind for Jesus. God has had a deeper and broader purpose in mind all along, as Jesus reminded them:

... there were many widows in Israel during the time of Elijah [but] Elijah was not sent to anyone in Israel ... only to a widow living in Sidon.

And there were many people suffering in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, yet not one of them was healed, but only Naaman the Syrian.

Jesus reminded them that God sent his prophets to people in Sidon and Syria, to foreigners, to outsiders.

Was Jesus deliberately antagonizing them? Or simply speaking the truth? The truth that God is God, not of just one people, but of all?

It's not just about you. It's not just about you. God's agenda is deeper and broader. Why send money to Haiti when we have needy people here? Because it's not just about us. Why send a mission team to New Orleans when we have folks that need our help here? Because it's not just about us.

It was then the people turned on Jesus. The worshipping congregation became an angry mob and they dragged him out of town to the edge of a cliff where they meant to throw him off. Jesus was going to pay the price of being a prophet.

But not this time. Eventually, yes, but not this time.

[Jesus] walked through the middle of the crowd and went his way ...

Imagine that scene! A nice Sabbath morning congregation, probably much like the folks gathered in church here this morning, suddenly burning with anger drag Jesus out of the synagogue and down the streets to the edge of town. What do you suppose Jesus is doing all the while? Kicking and screaming in protest, trying to get away? I don't think so!

He lets them have their way with him and they bring him to the edge of the cliff where they all step back, looking at him, waiting for someone to step up to push him over. But no one does, He walks away through the midst of the crowd and goes on his way.

This is glory! The glory of the prophet, the truth-teller, who walked away!

Why was it? Was it the power of the truth itself that kept their hands off Jesus? Did the light finally dawn on them at the edge of that cliff? When they looked at him there, did they finally see him as he was? Did they realize it was truth he spoke? When they looked at themselves there, did they finally realize the horror of what they intended to do?

Luke doesn't explain. Why Jesus was able to walk away remains a mystery. But, in any case, this time, the messenger was spared. This time, the message was spared. This time, the glory of God was revealed as Jesus went his way.

It was a sign of God's glory, and a preview of glories to come. Because once Jesus did pay the price of being a prophet, once Jesus was put to death by the powers that be, God raised him to life.

Jesus was a prophet, but more than a prophet, too, not a martyr, but a savior. Jesus' resurrection is the sign that God's message will not be killed, the sign that God's messengers will not be silenced. Jesus' resurrection gives us courage to speak the truth, too, to take up today the prophet's cause without fear of any price we may pay. In Jesus, because of Jesus, through Jesus, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never put it out!