

Matthew 5:21-37
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Tell the Truth; "start close in"

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16 If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, 20 loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Matthew 5:21-37

21 Jesus said: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool," you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. 27 "You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. 31 "It was also said, "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. 33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' 34 But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let your word be "Yes, Yes' or "No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

"We must tell the truth. First to ourselves about ourselves....We have to own up to what is wrong. We must tell the truth."

Those words were spoken by the Rev. Katherine Lankford, member of our partner parish, Kwanzaa. It was four weeks ago, on the Saturday of MLK weekend, at inspiring gathering at Westminster Presbyterian Church. Led by Westminster pastor Douglas Mitchell and Alika Galloway, pastor of Kwanzaa, it was their fifteenth annual conversation about race. The theme was from Dr. King's 1967 book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*

Several St. John's members were there, along with folks from the two host parishes. Everyone present was looking in hope to community, seeking ways we could move forward together to heal the enormous divisions in our society.

The relief in the room was palpable when Katherine said, simply: "We must tell the truth."

"Truth" has been taking a beating for some time in the broken politics and rhetoric of our day. Twelve years ago, you may recall, comedian Stephen Colbert coined the word "truthiness", in a parody defense of the George W. Bush administration. He said: "We're not talking about the truth; we're talking about something that seems like truth — the truth we want to exist."

Today it's so much worse. The very notion of "truth" is mocked by people in the administration. And "false news"--that pure oxymoron--can be cooked up by anybody. It was a horrifying to learn after the elections that a lot of the pro-Trump "false news" had been invented by teenagers in the small Macedonian town of Veles. They made fortunes floating it on Facebook.

Thank God, scriptural truths are timeless. After all, in thousands of years we haven't had to amend the Ten Commandments. They cover it all.

Today's readings **unflinchingly** tell the truth. First, there's Moses on the threshold of the Promised Land. In the previous chapters, he has literally laid out the law to the people Israel. Here he concludes with the stark truth: every person must choose how s/he wants to go forward. Will you love God, follow God and live with blessing; or to turn from God and die in adversity?

Jesus is teaching the disciples. He has just said that his purpose was to **fulfill** the law of Moses. Now he shows what that means. Taking commandments one by one, telling the truth, he goes deeply into the root causes—the human thoughts and emotions that underlie each transgression.

Jesus calls his followers to self-knowledge, to integrity. He speaks directly, personally, to each of them, to each of us.

It's hard reading. None of us escapes.

In English, since Thee, thy, thou, and thine have passed from usage (except in hymnody), we are left with just "you, yours". So English translations from the Greek blur the lines between the single and the plural, the individual and the collective. That makes it easier to dodge responsibility!

My NT Greek prof solved the problem: translating from Greek, singular was "you"; plural was "y'all". Let me do the same here. "**Y'all** have heard that it was said... 'You shall not murder'....But I say to you that if **you** [Susan] are angry with a brother or sister, **you** [Susan] will be liable to judgment; and if **you** insult a brother or sister, **you** will be liable to the council; and if **you** say, 'You fool,' **you** will be liable to the hell of fire."

Jesus calls me individually to acknowledge my innermost thoughts and feelings, the ones that can lead me astray. That's part of the truth that can make me free.

Anger, suspicion, hatred and disrespect **are** the seeds of violence, war, murder. They also are the seeds of division—be it social, political, psychological.

As the divisions among us come into ever sharper and more baffling contrast, I need to tell the truth to myself about myself. That means spiritual house-keeping: sweeping out the anger, fear and disrespect that divide me from others, confuse me, pull me down paths of retribution.

America is in the midst of a moral crisis. Every one of us has to take stock of our own thoughts, words and actions.

At the Westminster meeting and again at our Outreach Committee meeting a couple of weeks ago Mark Lindberg spoke of the need for moral imagination. Jane Gilgun quickly Googled and shared this definition with the group:

*The moral imagination is an enduring source of inspiration that elevates us **to first principles** as it guides us upwards towards virtue and wisdom and redemption.*

In the pause that followed, Jane invited each of us at the table share our "first principles". One after another, quietly, we did:

"Love of God, Love of neighbor"
"Respect the dignity of every human being"
"Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God".
"Seek and serve Christ in all persons".
"Love"
"Justice"
"Peace"

How simply, how spontaneously, how sincerely, those principles emerged—echoing the foundations of our faith: the Great Commandment, the Sermon on the Mount, our Baptismal Covenant.

It was a holy moment.

We move forward together when we share our truths in vulnerable, soul-searching conversations with a variety of voices—as we did then and at the Westminster meeting.

It's best in person. But there's good work elsewhere—like NPR's call-in program, Indivisible, that fosters respectful exchange across differences. What a welcome antidote to the ideological hate-talk of recent times!

God is calling us to join in creating a veritable banquet of lemonade, lemon sorbet, lemon meringue pie and more out of the present harvest of lemons.

We need to keep respectfully listening and sharing among us here, welcoming differences in our own congregation. We are one Body in Christ, but we are **not** of one political party, not of one perspective—nor should we be.

How do we move forward together? Knowing, living, and sharing our first principles.

Loving God,
loving our neighbor,
respecting the dignity of every human being,
doing justice,
loving mercy,
walking humbly with our God.

We at St. John's will move forward together with others—we already are!--on some of the promising avenues that are opening every day, including our work with Kwanzaa.

We are moving forward together

At the same time, Jesus calls us to return regularly to self-examination, to the center, where we began.

Seek within. Tell the truth to yourself about yourself. Know your inner thoughts, emotions, motivations; free yourself; let go of those that are harmful to yourself and others.

Be whole hearted. Know yourself, your core values. Articulate and hold up the "first principles" that shape your moral imagination, that inspire and elevate you to wisdom, virtue and redemption.

Seek within.

David Whyte said it well in his poem "start close in". I'll end with that.

*Start close in,
don't take the second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step
you don't want to take.*

*Start with
the ground
you know,
the pale ground
beneath your feet,
your own
way of starting
the conversation.*

*Start with your own
question,
give up on other
people's questions,
don't let them
smother something
simple.*

*To find
another's voice,
follow
your own voice,
wait until
that voice*

*becomes a
private ear
listening
to another.*

*Start right now
take a small step
you can call your own
don't follow
someone else's
heroics, be humble
and focused,
start close in,
don't mistake
that other
for your own.*

*Start close in,
don't take
the second step
or the third,
start with the first
thing
close in,
the step
you don't want to take*

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