

Seeking Truth

I don't remember the first time I heard the story of God's call to the boy Samuel. It is a story we tell our children, focusing on listening to and recognizing God's call. We talk about how God calls us today. We talk about how we know it is God's voice. But we seldom focus on the message that God gave to Samuel.

It was not a rosy message, not a happy message; God's word given through prophets often called people to be accountable for the injustices they were committing. It was often a judgement on the sins committed by people in power upon the vulnerable.

Samuel was still a boy when his parents Elkanah and Hannah brought him to Shiloh where Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord. Hophni and Phinehas were scoundrels. When people brought their offerings to the Lord, Hophni and Phinehas took the best for themselves. If people protested, that they wanted to offer the sacrifice correctly, Hophni and Phinehas would take what they wanted by force. Although Eli had confronted his sons, he was old and weak. They did not listen to him. And he let it go. They continued in their wicked ways.

Eli had already had one message from a man of God condemning the actions of his sons and warning of judgement upon Eli's house. But Eli was Samuel's teacher, Samuel's mentor. Samuel was afraid to tell Eli what God had said. "I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever." To Eli's credit, he insisted that Samuel tell him and Samuel complied. It was the beginning of Samuel's life as a prophet of God.

Accountability is important. To be accountable is to take responsibility, to recognize that one must meet required standards. Accountability recognizes that actions have consequences. Accountability allows us to celebrate accomplishments. Accountability also makes repentance and forgiveness possible because it recognizes and acknowledges wrongdoing. Accountability allows us to learn from our mistakes. Accountability allows for transformation.

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King, Jr. day. It is a day when we recognize the nonviolent work that he did to bring justice for black men, women and children. This week I reread the letter that he wrote from the Birmingham jail, where he was incarcerated for confronting the injustice in that community.

In that letter he called the church to account, particularly the white church. Although there were notable exceptions, what he found was a lack of authenticity, actions that did not match words. He wrote, “But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.” That letter was written in April, 1963.

I wonder what he would have said about the evangelical church in America today, in broad terms a church that claims to be pro-life but often supports policies that deny life. Surely he would have called to account. Last week when rioters overran the capital some sported shirts with slogans like “Hold the line Patriots. God wins” or “God, Guns, Trump, Keep America Great” or “Holy Bible” or “Auschwitz, Work brings freedom”—the slogan etched over the gates of the Nazi concentration camp. The violence and disrespect shown does not reflect the God who calls us to love our neighbor and to resolve our differences peacefully.

We live in an age where unwelcome news is labeled fake, lies are spoken as truth and truth is labelled a lie. People do not know what to believe, or whom to believe. Even family members disagree about that is true. We need accountability. We need a standard for truth.

Debie Thomas is director of children's and family ministries at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Palo Alto, California. She writes, “I know that it has become a cliché to say we live in a post-truth society — as if “post-truth” is a viable option for our survival, going forward. But the fact is, it *matters* what our eyes see. It *matters* what we apprehend as the real, the genuine, and the faithful. When truth dies, people die, too”.

Truth mattered for Eli's house. The message God sent through Samuel came true. Eli's sons died. Truth matters for us. It matters what we see; it matters what we believe is real. It matters what we see of God. The good news is that God sees us.

This morning our call to worship recalled the words of Psalm 139. Jon proclaimed, “We've come to worship God” and we responded “God has searched us and knows us.” This Psalm proclaims that God knows us intimately. God knows our coming and going. There is no place we can go where God is not. It is God who knit us together in our mother's womb and knows all about each one of us even before we were formed.

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.”

God knows the truth about us. God knows the truth about me. This Psalm also calls each of us to search for the truth about ourselves. “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Accountability begins with me, with self-examination. Where have I contributed to unjust treatment of others, to racism, to bigotry, to misunderstanding? Where do I support systems of oppression? When do I put my wishes ahead of someone else’s needs? Have I spoken truth to power as Samuel and the prophets were called to do?

When I consider the awfulness of last week’s attack on our seat of government, I also need to ask myself, where have I contributed to the divide that separates our country so deeply? Have I supported efforts that lead to cooperation instead of divisiveness? Have I truly listened to the fears and concerns of those I disagree with? Have I offered them respect even though I disagree? It is easy to condemn the other’s actions, but it is also necessary to consider my own motives and deeds. “See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

God is faithful. God’s lovingkindness and mercy are available to all. That love and grace is not limited to an elite few. But we people are not always so faithful; history shows us that systems of oppression exist, that people can become corrupt, benefiting by denying others the same rights, the same privileges, the same opportunities. God especially cares for the most vulnerable, for those who struggle, for those who need help. And that means those who oppress must be called to account. Those who profit unjustly at the cost of others must be accountable.

I saw this quotation attributed to Archbishop Desmond Tutu. “Truth first, and then reconciliation. Accountability first, and then healing. Confession first, and then restoration to the community.” God’s love for each requires that we also love each other. We are accountable.

The Gospel of John tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. That Word is Jesus. Jesus is our truth. He is our truth because he testifies to and reveals the faithfulness and lovingkindness of God. He is our truth because he shows us how to live, how to follow God’s way.

Jesus did not just speak of God. He lived what he taught. He did not just say “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” He loved his enemies and called them to account. Instead of taking a sword to defend himself he allowed them to crucify him, even asking God to forgive them as he hung, dying on the cross. Jesus is our truth, the standard by which we can identify what is true and what is false. Truth will conform to Jesus’ life and teaching. Belief is not a formula that saves us but a commitment to follow Jesus in living God’s way.

In our New Testament reading today Nathaniel is sitting under a fig tree. His friend Philip finds him there and with excitement declares, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathaniel is skeptical. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” he asks. Philip doesn’t argue with him. He says simply, “Come and see.”

Nathaniel goes with Philip. Jesus sees them coming. He declares, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Nathaniel is astonished. How does Jesus know him? They have never met before. And Jesus tells him, “I saw you under the fig tree, before Philip called you.”

The good news is that Jesus knows each of us as we truly are, and Jesus loves us, each one, every one. He comes not to condemn us but to save us, to call us to the life God intends us to live. Jesus comes among us to celebrate our joys with us and to mourn our sorrows with us. Jesus comes, restoring people to life, to community, to wholeness. Jesus cares when we are hurt or struggling. Like a good shepherd he anoints our wounds and carries us in his arms. Jesus is our truth, showing us God’s love and inviting us to participate in God’s lovingkindness toward the world. Jesus invites us to “come and see.” He calls us, “follow me.” He shows us God’s truth, God’s lovingkindness, God’s grace, God’s mercy, God’s faithfulness.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Amen.