

Sermon for June 28, 2020 – “Can We Handle The Truth?”

3rd Sunday of Lent, Year A – Texts: Isaiah 58:1-9; 1 John 1:1-10

Rev. Dr. Jeff Colarossi, Westwood First Presbyterian Church

Have you ever noticed how children can be honest? Sometimes brutally so until they are taught some social norms. I was thinking about a story that I'd read not that long ago. I've feeling this is going to hit home with many of you! It's about a mom who went to the grocery store with her preschool-age son. They were making their way through the store with the child going, “Mommy, can I have this? “Mommy, can I have that?” “Mommy, if I'm really good, can I have a toy?” Those of you who are/were parents know the ritual. Finally, there was relative silence. Mom was thinking about what to make for dinner while the child was staring at the shelves to see what else he “needed.” Suddenly, a man in a wheelchair with no legs entered the aisle. Anticipating an outburst from her son the woman glanced down hoping the boy would be so busy checking out the frozen foods that he wouldn't notice the man wheeling toward them. Maybe the man would be so busy checking out the frozen foods he wouldn't notice them! Well, not this time! They both looked down the aisle at each other at the same time! Oh, no, mom thought here it comes, some totally insensitive remark from her four-year-old which she knew was going to embarrass both her and the man. This is not going to be pretty she thought. So, she picked up her son and held on tightly hoping to make a quick exit down the bread aisle. She held him a little tighter. The boy opened his mouth, Mom braced herself for the words she knew were going to embarrass them all. But what the boy said was, “Put me down mommy—you're hurting me!” The man's eyes went from the boy straight to her. The look in his eyes told her that the man knew what was happening. But, while she was absolutely right in knowing that she'd be embarrassed, the words she'd feared, “Where are his legs?” or “What's wrong with him?” were never spoken by the boy. Ultimately, what caused her embarrassment was her ineffective attempt to avoid the truth as she tried to control the situation and the response. The man had probably been in similar situations and he handled the whole thing better than mom did. Mom blushed, let go of her son and apologized to both of them. And that was it.

So, why tell that story? It seems innocent enough, right? Well, I use it because of the truth it reveals that the truth is sometimes hard to hear. Especially the truth about ourselves. Kids usually don't have a problem telling people they're fat or are missing their legs. It's different for us adults though it's not so much that we don't **know** the truth as it is our disdain in **acknowledging** it. We live in a state of denial and it isn't where God wants us to be. God wants us to live as John writes in a portion of his first letter that we just heard “**...so that our joy may be complete.**” God desires fellowship with us and John offers us a way to that. He tells us, very plainly, that if we “**...say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness we lie and do not do what is true.**” But John goes on to say, “**If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.**”

Then he hits us with this, **“If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we say that we have not sinned we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.”** This is the truth that we try to avoid and loathe as we are to admit it, we probably already know we’re sinning. We’re probably hoping that since everyone else is doing it we’re not too bad. We may be pinning our hopes on the fact that we do the right thing most of the time and may even hesitate before breaking any of the ten commandments. Which is ironic because the first commandment is to honor the Lord and keep the commandments!

I suspect we know in our heart of hearts that we have much in common with those to whom John wrote his epistle. But I also suspect we’re like the mom I mentioned earlier. She tried to hide the truth and control it so she wouldn’t be embarrassed. She was wrong. Much of the time, so are we.

So the next question is this, What are we going to do about it? It’s an easy question to ask but a whole lot harder to answer. I believe the first step is to be honest and look at ourselves, deep within ourselves. In the grocery store mom began with an apology to her son to the man and to God. It’s because, you see, the issue is not **how much** we sin, it’s **when** and **why!** I’ll be honest, until a few weeks ago I never gave it that much thought. But then I starting thinking about it, Do we really think that God doesn’t notice? Do we think that God doesn’t care how **low** we’ve set the bar for ourselves? Do we think we can hide the truth about ourselves from God? Do we really think God can’t handle our truth? I’m pretty sure God can, but I’m not so sure about us. So here’s my question, can we handle the truth when it comes to sin? To be clear, I’m not talking about Sin in general. I mean, most people are actually quite good at pointing out other people’s sins. I’m talking about our own. I’m guessing most of us have seen the movie *A Few Good Men*. How many of us have? I love that movie. Jack Nicholson as Colonel Jessup, awesome! I especially love, as I’m sure most of you do, Colonel Jessup’s final courtroom rant which starts with one of the all-time great movie lines, “You can’t handle the truth!” There was a time when I could recite that entire speech. I had lots more time to kill in those days. And for the record, I think we want him on that wall; we need him on that wall!

So I was thinking this week about all this and whether or not there’s any truth to it. I think Colonel Jessup is exactly right. But I’ll ask the question anyway, Can we handle the truth? Can we handle the truth about our sin? Part of me feels that some of us really don’t want to know the truth because we believe that we cannot, in fact, handle the truth. We feel better off if we don’t know it so that way life can go on as normal (whatever **that** is) where we “think” we have everything figured out or at least know how to **cope** with our dysfunction. To find out something isn’t true or to finally learn the truth about something throws us all out of rhythm. We don’t like hearing the truth because then we may have to deal with it and it’s easier if we don’t. It’s easier, but not always better. I’d go so far to say that it actually **is** harder! Because now we have to work that much **harder** to suppress the truth. And unfortunately we tend to take the easy road.

But Colonel Jessup's famous statement, "You can't handle the truth!" makes me think of another famous statement that offers a word of hope for those struggling with the truth, "The truth will set you free." Sound familiar? It should. For the record, these words are from Jesus himself and come from Chapter 8 of John's Gospel.

So what will we do? How then shall we live? It's up to you but I think the choice is clear. So many times we believe we "can't handle the truth" so we bury our heads in the sand and choose to ignore it. Unfortunately, when we pull our heads out whatever the 'truth' is it's still there waiting for us. Ignoring things or putting them off will only make matters worse. But the truth will set us free. How powerful is that statement?!?

Not long ago, a very close friend of mine recently admitted that he's an alcoholic. He entered a twelve-step program and has been sober for almost six months now. He's shown amazing strength and courage and if he's watching right now I want him to know how much I admire him! As I see it admitting the truth about ourselves, no matter how bad it might be, is the first step in finding true freedom. Let me put it this way, how many of us, when asked: "How are you?" will say "Fine"—even when it's not? It sounds innocent enough; that's how the self-deception starts. But telling someone that everything isn't okay brings freedom and it's okay to do so. We don't, as author Esther Fleece puts it, we don't have to "fake fine" anymore. You've heard me say repeatedly that we're commanded to "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." But beyond being willing to bear someone else's burdens we must be willing to allow others to bear ours! Call me crazy but I think the church should be the one place where we ought to be able to go for help and find the truth! That's the kind of church I believe people need and are looking for. I believe it's the kind of church we **need** to be and **can** be. If we're willing to try God **will** be with us and people **will** find us. Trust me, God already knows the truth about us and loves us anyway. And as a pastor I want nothing more than for people (you people!) live in the freedom that only the truth of Christ can bring.

This world needs a few good men **and** women willing to face reality and with Christ's help you **can** handle the truth. I guarantee the freedom that comes with the truth is well worth it!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.