

Telling the Truth

communion meditation

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I Corinthians 15:12, 16-22, 51-57

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A fellow pastor, who has a passion for motorcycling, shares the story of going shopping for a new Harley. The salesman ushered him out to the sales floor to compare the new models in stock and, of course, took him immediately to the top of the line. "This baby," the salesman assured him in glowing terms, "can really move. She can go from sitting still to 60 miles an hour in seconds. She can stop on a dime, and she can take curves at speeds you wouldn't believe!" As they continued circling the beauty and kicking its wheels, the salesman couldn't stop singing its praises. "By the way," he asked, "what do you do?" Upon hearing the pastor's admission that he was indeed a clergyman, the salesman's tone, demeanor, and everything about him changed. "You know," he said, "this vehicle is probably the safest on the road."

Is that the way it is with pastors? And with people of faith? Are we about playing it safe? Holding onto life with both hands?

David Buttrick has stated it well: "Our lives are as brief as the hyphen between the dates on the gravestone." And we are confronted with the challenge of living them well. It isn't about holding on for dear life. It isn't about being so fearful of losing our lives that we never really live. It is about finding or, better, *making* meaning in life so that the moments of our lives brim with joy and purpose. It is about making commitments so fundamental to everything we are and do that we live with passion. It is not about dodging life but meeting life head-on. It is about telling and living the truth.

What are the fundamental truth claims of our faith? What is the nature of the truth that claims us to the extent that we are not just talking about a set of appropriately worded propositions but the foundations that determine the shape of our lives?

Biblical faith is honest about death. "On August 14, 1982, the stars fell from my sky," writes Ann Weems. "My son, my Todd, had been killed less than an hour after his twenty-first birthday." At the suggestion of her friend Walter Brueggemann, Ann began wording her grief into laments similar to those of the Hebrew Psalter and, in the process, found herself connecting with others enduring tragedy. "Stories like mine," she observes, "were painful, too painful for any of us to try fitting our souls into ten correct steps of grieving." In 1995 she published *The Pain That Lives in Our Souls*, a collection of laments "for those who weep and for those who weep with those who weep. . . for those whose souls struggle with the dayliness of faithkeeping in the midst of life's assaults and obscenities."

The Psalms, nearly half of which are songs of lament and poems of complaint, stand at the heart of Israel's faith and our faith. They are, Walter Brueggemann observes, about *truth-telling*--"truth-telling that we are always needing to relearn, given our triumphalist inclination to denial and our orthodox propensity to protect God from too much risky trouble." The death against which the psalmists rail is not the appropriate ending of life in a peaceable old age, but all of those forces loose in the world which negate human life--disease, enmity, imprisonment, drought, famine, and injustice. "Truth-telling is a primal requirement for biblical faith--no cover-ups, no euphemisms, no deceptions" [*The Living Pulpit*, (Jl-Sept, 1998), 34-35].

Biblical faith is honest about God. Truth-telling about death is met in Israel's faith with truth-telling about God. We are not talking here about an abstract, polite description of God that merely mouths the appropriate words. It is an engagement with God--a wrestling with God, if you will--at the very depths of our being. Trust in God in the face of all of the suffering and injustice that confronts us is not easy to maintain. Yet, struggling to hold onto faith with every fiber of our being in the midst of the storms of life makes faith truly our own.

On the surface, Paul's contending with the Corinthians on the resurrection of the dead may seem like an exercise in logic. The Corinthians seemingly had no problem with accepting the resurrection of Christ. For them, that was a given. But a general resurrection for all who died? Now that was another matter! Paul's obvious sense of exasperation may stem from his frustration with those whose gnostic leanings convinced them that they had already reached perfection. Why would they need resurrection--much less a *bodily* resurrection? As he makes his case, however, insisting that Christ is only the "first fruit" of all those whom God will raise, his own experience of faith and the experience of those who have died in faith begins to loom large. The derision and torment that he faces daily, his life and death struggle against beastly opposition in Ephesus weighs upon him. "Why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour?" he asks. "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

Logic does not convince Paul. He is convinced by his everyday experience of God in Christ. To be sure, much of the hope he encounters there is still a mystery. He doesn't move to lay out a roadmap of how everything will take place, but to raise a doxology. Isaiah's prophecy of old will be fulfilled: Death will be swallowed up in victory. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? . . . Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Faith calls us to be fully alive in the present. A couple of decades ago a fellow minister in Louisville, Kentucky, went through the wrenching experience of almost losing a child in death. After the ordeal was over, a colleague approached him with the consolation, “That must have been pure hell.” Following a moment’s reflection, the young minister responded, “No, hell is the absence of God; and I have never been more aware of the presence of God than I was in that moment.”

If the son had died, the pastor may well have found himself struggling with the same profound sense of the absence of God that Jesus himself experienced. That’s the way it is sometimes with faith. Sometimes we struggle, and we must be truthful about our struggle.

Faith doesn’t merely look beyond the grave to find hope. Faith speaks to hope in the midst of life—to a hope that sustains us in spite of all the evidences to the contrary. In the words of Abraham Heschel, “Eternity is not perpetual future but perpetual presence. God has planted in us the seed of eternal life. The world to come is not only a hereafter but also a *herenow*” [*Man Is Not Alone*, 295]. Or in the words of St. Ignatius, a first century Bishop of Antioch, “The glory of God is the person fully alive.”

So, live. Hope. Struggle. Be truthful. Be attentive to the presence of God. Be thankful for the gift of life that God extends to you. And give your life as a *Eucharist*, a thank offering back to the God who gave it.