

Facing the Truth

sermon digest

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Isaiah 59
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In one of the most dramatic moments in history—a moment that easily equaled the opening of the Berlin Wall only three months earlier—South African President F. W. De Klerk announced in February 1990 the lifting of a ban against anti-apartheid organizations and released anti-apartheid activist Nelson Mandela from 27 years in prison—18 years of which had been spent in hard labor. Difficult negotiations over the next four years culminated in the election of a multi-racial government with Mandela as president. Caught between a white majority population where many wanted simply to “forgive and forget” and those who demanded that the government “prosecute and punish,” the way to a united nation appeared rocky, at best. How could the new government address more than three decades of bitter injustice while setting the nation on a positive course into the future? Turning the tables and plunging the nation into an exercise in ferreting out the guilty would not in itself get the job done, but neither would a collective turning away from the truth and pretending that the nation’s troubled past had never transpired.

One of the new government’s first actions was the selection of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The path to reconciliation, to a shared future of hope, had to be along the way of honestly confronting the truth. “Truth,” theologian Walter Wink insists, “is medicine. Without it, a society remains infected with past evils that will inevitably break out in the future” [*When the Powers Fall*, 53]. Or as South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, put it, “Reconciliation is not about being cozy; it is not about pretending that things were other than they were. Reconciliation based on falsehood, on not facing up to reality, is not true reconciliation and will not last” [“Foreword,” *Truth & Reconciliation Report*, vol. 1, p.17]. “We needed,” the Archbishop explained, “to acknowledge that we had a horrendous past. We needed to look the beast in the eye, so that the past wouldn’t hold us hostage anymore” [*Facing the Truth with Bill Moyers*, March 30, 1999].

For four years, South Africans lived in what Bill Moyers has called “an echo chamber of horrors” as they listened week after week to “a soundtrack of human tragedy.” Volunteers traveled the country, as did the commission itself, documenting the testimony of more than 21,000 victims who cited a litany of unlawful detentions, abductions, beatings, burnings, torture, rape and murder. Covered extensively by the national and international media, the commission’s work came to exemplify the foundational role of truth telling in the search for reconciliation and forgiveness. In the words of Father Michael Lapsley, himself half-blinded and maimed by a security police parcel bomb, in order for healing to begin, the commission had to discover and follow a process that ensured that the people’s suffering was “heard, recognized and revered by the nation.” Or as one elderly black man put it after giving his testimony, “Today, the nation cried my tears with me” [quoted in P. Storey, “A Different Kind of Justice,” *Christian Century*, Sept. 10-17, 1997].

Forgiveness begins with facing the truth. Contrary to popular misconceptions, forgiveness is not about forgetfulness. As Donald Shriver points out in his *Forgiveness in Politics*, we would do well to replace the well worn phrase “to forgive and forget” with the more accurate “remember and forgive.” Forgiveness begins with a remembering and a moral judgment of wrong, injustice, and injury. . . . Absent a preliminary agreement between two or more parties that there is something from the past to be forgiven, forgiveness stalls at the starting gate” [in “Coming to Terms with the Past,” *Annual of Society of Christian Ethics*, 1999, p. 240].

Reconciliation involves what the German theologian Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz speaks of as “deep remembering” as opposed to “selective remembering,” which focuses on one sided, convenient truths. Deep remembering works actively to unmask denial and face up to the anguish and bitterness of the past in order to “transfigure” the pain of the past in preparation for a new and hopeful future.

We are called to truthfulness before God and in our relationships to one another. Enter Isaiah—Third Isaiah, to be more precise. First Isaiah, you will recall, preached in the eighth century, anticipating the downfall of Jerusalem and Judah. Second Isaiah, preaching in 539, anticipated the downfall of Babylon and the exiles’ return home. Third Isaiah (who some believe is only a continuation of Second Isaiah) preaches to the handful of exiles who did make the trip back home—back to a ravaged land, a city and temple in ruins, and hostile neighbors. Lacking city walls to protect them from marauding bands of outlaws and a central government to galvanize them for the task at hand, and a temple to inspire them for the journey, the situation languished and seemed to worsen daily. In a combined lament, protest

song, Isaiah mimics the objections of the people: “Surely,” they wailed, “the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear” (59:1).

“No,” the prophet assures the people, “that is not the case,” and then he proceeds to build a case against the people themselves. The problem resides not with God; the problem resides in a people who have built a wall of iniquity separating them from God. To those who would protest their innocent suffering, he lays out the case against them: “Your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things. No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil. Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace.” (59:2-8).

Their selective memories were working overtime. Far from the pitiful victims of a weak or uncaring God, the people were afflicted with lies that deceived them about the true nature of their situation. Only if they allow themselves to admit the truth about themselves, only when they name their own wrongs against God and against one another will they be freed. Isaiah gives them a model prayer of confession: “Our transgressions ... are many, and our sins testify against us. Our transgressions indeed are with us, and we know our iniquities: transgressing, and denying the LORD, and turning away from following our God, talking oppression and revolt, conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart. Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter” (59:12-14). Only upon truthfully assessing the unjust and oppressive nature of their relationships with one another, only in confessing and ending the shedding of the innocent blood of their own brothers and sisters, only by returning to truth and justice in their dealings with one another in the public square—only then would they have hope in the God of covenant. Truth telling before God and truth telling and honesty in their relationships with one another was essential. There was no substitute.

Jesus said it, too. True worship of God is worship that is wrapped not in the camouflage of piety or hypocrisy, but in the openness and transparency of the spirit of truth from which our worship and very lives proceed. Truth, Jesus said, and only truth, frees. Untruth and the refusal to face up to the truth leaves us enslaved to the lies and deception to which we have committed our way. Truth and only truth opens the way to a future of hope.

A good word, is it not, for the people of Isaiah’s day and Jesus’ day? We all know about *their* issues. But what about our day and our issues? What about our world? Our nation, our community, family and church? Do these words not hold worlds of meaning for the very crises confronting us? Seeing the results of an economy that has had a heyday based on lies and deceptive spin, are we, too, not called to embrace the truth? Living in a culture that too readily, on the one hand, encourages us to hold close and nurture our hurts and resentments or, on the other hand, rushes us to too quickly smooth over and dismiss them, we, too, need to stop and take the time to assess and commit ourselves to telling the truth. One sided, angry embitterment that refuses to move outside of itself and seek pathways to healing and reconciliation is not the path to a hopeful future. Neither is burying the truth and acting as if it did not happen or is unimportant. “It doesn’t matter” is not forgiveness.

Reconciliation with God and reconciliation with one another must begin with facing the truth. Apart from truth telling before God, between one another and within ourselves, reconciliation is only a sham.