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Jeremiah 6:13-15

John 1:1-5, 14-18

## COMMONWELLTH – CONFRONTING THE LIE

When I was a kid, there was a game show on television that our family watched that was called, “To Tell the Truth.” There have been several versions of this show over the years, but the one I watched and recall was hosted by Bud Collyer. The basic premise of the show was that there were three contestants, each of whom claimed to be the same person. Generally, the person who was telling the truth was someone with a somewhat unusual occupation or personal history. There were four celebrities who got to ask questions to determine who was telling the truth and who was not. After the period of questioning, they would each vote as to who they thought was the one who was telling the truth. Then the host would say, “Will the real Mary McCoy please stand?”<sup>1</sup> There would always be some false starts before the truth-teller stood, but finally there was one person standing. It was all for entertainment, but those who were good at lying were admired and rewarded.

This is the second in a sermon series that looks at some of the passages from the Book of Jeremiah that help us to know some necessities for wellbeing as a society. The prophet Jeremiah was one who was committed to telling the truth. Truth be told, he was probably viewed as being rather obnoxious about truth, not always following what etiquette said should go unmentioned. But he saw his society’s less-than-truthful ways as being among those realities that kept it from being healthy or fully well. This gets expressed in our reading from Jeremiah where he is critical of religious leaders who, in their analysis of what was on the horizon, indicated there would be peace. Sometimes people are less than truthful simply because they don’t have enough information. But

Jeremiah is convinced that these leaders were intentionally misleading people – they were lying.

They knew that there was a growing power in Babylon, with whom they did not want to negotiate. They were comfortable with the status quo and did not want to change direction, so they told the people and they told themselves that God would protect them from their foes to the north, for they were God's chosen people. Everything was going to be alright. But it was a lie. Jeremiah wouldn't settle for a temporary or a shallow peace which would lead to later destruction. He called for a major change of course, but his was a lonely voice addressing an unpopular reality. So the Hebrews did not listen to Jeremiah and finally the Babylonians swept through their land in what was one of the most devastating of times in the history of the Jewish people.

In the Hebrew language, the word for a lie is sheqer. Say it with me – sheqer – it even sounds bad. Truth be told, the most powerful lies are those that sound sweet and good. Their power is primarily in the human desire to want to believe them, even when there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary. When the prospect of facing the truth is difficult, we might want to avoid it so much that it doesn't take a high-quality yarn to pull the wool over our eyes. In the course of human history, even when the truth is scarce, the supply seems to be in excess of the demand. Now, as then, lies that sound good are often told to gain personal power. But truth be told, those lies eventually lead to ruin, sometimes on a broad scale.

When I was living in the Atlanta area a number of years ago, there was a major problem with the underground sewage piping. In spite of studies indicating otherwise, the political leaders, year after year, told themselves and the citizens that inexpensive patches of the sewage infrastructure would adequately address the problem. But eventually something in addition to their lies began to smell. You would have thought that with their noses growing from all of the lies, they would have smelled the scope of the problem earlier. As it turned out, a much

more expensive solution was required than if the problem had been addressed honestly years before. Lies can be quite costly. Truth be told, personal relationships and societal relationships that are based on lies can't survive, because lies destroy confidence, security, and trust.

People who work in the field of alcohol or substance abuse use the imagery of the elephant in the room that goes unmentioned. Imagine such a big presence in the midst of the family that everyone maneuvers around without ever acknowledging it. That is often indicative of how a family responds to substance abuse by one of its members, acting out the lie that it is not really that big a problem or fantasizing that if the dilemma is ignored, it will go away. In other circumstances, there are parents who lie to themselves that the bad example they set for their kids in various areas of their lives won't really hurt them. Sounds like people telling themselves, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.

Ignoring what is true or perpetuating lies does not lead toward a common well-being. Corporations focused on their short-term bottom line aren't always on the up-and-up about the total effects of their products. Madison Avenue will tell us we can be whole and well through purchasing more and more and more. If we ignore what science tells us about the impact of what we put into our ecosystem or into our individual bodies, we do so at our peril. At the same time, we are lying to ourselves if we believe technology has a true fix for every problem – sometimes our human behavior will have to change.

We as a church aren't immune to enticing lies. A good Presbyterian lie is that if we simply study an issue and even pass a resolution about it in the Session or at presbytery, then we have adequately addressed it. We also may tell ourselves that if we keep on doing what has failed to attract new members in the past, that we may get better results in the future – not likely.

In being faithful negotiators of Christ's way in this world, we need good information. But truth be told, while having access to good information is important, in an age of information overload, we still have to figure out which information is most pertinent. Primarily, we need to have hearts that don't want to be lied to. We need courage to not just recognize lies, but to confront them and the damage they cause. Whether that is in the context of the public arena, our church, our family, or within ourselves, confronting them can be difficult to do, so we need the grace and truth that comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ. He offers a richness of meaning to go along with good information so we can move toward a truth that not only informs, but transforms. Truth be told, we need hearts that long for truth, lives that are based on truth, and words that speak truth to power, whether that power is within us or somewhere else, because Jeremiah would tell us the journey toward truth is among the things that leads toward life and wholeness, a commonwealth. I was part of a jury in a federal court this past January. Similar to the vow that witnesses in court take, we need to search for and tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us, God. O God, of grace and truth, please help us. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To\\_Tell\\_the\\_Truth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_Tell_the_Truth)