

At the Core, Part 3: *Telling the Truth Isn't Easy to Do*
Jeremiah 1:4-10
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August 22, 2010

Many of you know that before I became an ordained minister I served as a counselor with troubled kids and families. One of the places I did that was the Florida United Methodist Children's Home up the road in Enterprise, just across Lake Monroe from Sanford. Some of you have been there.

Even though it was in 1976, I remember well my first day on the job at the children's home. I had just completed my Master of Social Work degree at Florida State, Jeanne and I had moved from Tallahassee to Central Florida, and I was excited to be starting my first job out of grad school. I had been assigned as the counselor for three cottages at the children's home: one for teenage boys, one for teenage girls, and one that was mixed, boys and girls from ten years old to thirteen.

One of the first things I did that first Monday morning was visit each of the three cottages to which I was assigned, introduce myself to the house parents who ran the cottages and directly supervised the kids, and begin to get the lay of the land. The kids are in school during the day, so when school was out and they were all back on campus, I left my office to go visit the kids in each of the three cottages.

Bacon Cottage was where I went first, partly because I could see a young teenage girl sitting on the front porch and I thought I'd make a connection with her before going inside and meeting the other kids. I felt pretty confident as I walked across the lawn that led up to Bacon Cottage. After all, I had my degree, I had had some good connections with kids in other settings, I was passionate about this work and felt a sense of calling to it. I

walked up to the front porch and reached out my hand to the girl, whose name was Tina. The scowl on her face did not change. No smile. No nod of the head. Nothing but unbridled anger as she ignored my extended hand, looked up at me with squinted eyes and let loose with a string of profanity that I won't repeat in this setting.

Needless to say, the initial interaction with Tina caught me off guard, and internally I vowed that I was going to reach that girl, that somehow I was going to build a relationship with her that would penetrate that thick exterior and make a difference in her life.

Part of my role with these kids was to interact not just with them, but also with their outside community – family members, when there were family members; social service agencies in the communities from which they had come; local churches that they may have been involved in, the public school system. The goal was to work on what needed to be worked on with the kids and with the various dimensions of the communities from which they came so that eventually they would return to the community – to their own family or to a foster or adoptive family, or perhaps a group home, or in the case of older teenagers, to supervised independent living.

As I began to put together the pieces of Tina's background I found that her mom and dad had divorced after her mom had been convicted on multiple charges of prostitution and dealing drugs and she was in prison. As I listened to Tina I heard over and over again her fantasy that her dad was going to come get her and take her home and they were going to build a new life together. And yet, he never came. He didn't visit. He didn't contact her. And for quite awhile he would not return my telephone calls.

Finally I wrote Tina's dad a long letter. In the letter I told him about what had been going on with her. I told him she was a bright, in many ways wonderful young woman who

was filled with rage because of her sense of having been abandoned and that she lived with a strong belief that her dad was going to swoop in as the proverbial knight in shining armor and take her away to a new life of family cohesion and love. I told him that I felt strongly that she wasn't going to be able to move out of the place where she was stuck until she heard from him and knew what was going to happen with their relationship.

A week after I sent that letter Tina's dad called me from where he lived in Jacksonville. He was a deeply wounded man, and because of the long-term actions of his former wife, Tina's mother, he really didn't believe that he was Tina's father. He told me that it was too painful for him even to see her, that he did not plan to be involved any more in raising her, that in fact he didn't want any more to do with her.

As you can imagine, there was much more to the interaction than I can go into here. There was the involvement of a family therapist in Jacksonville, there were serious attempts to intervene and move toward reconciliation between Tina and her dad over a period of about a year. Finally, it was clear that he was where he was, and that nothing was going to change how he felt and the decision he had made. Yet Tina still lived with her fantasy.

My approach with the dad shifted to encourage him to be willing to sit down with this now fourteen-year-old girl who saw him as her father and completely level with her as the best way to release her and for her to move on. And he agreed to do that. One Saturday morning he traveled from Jacksonville to Enterprise in order to sit down in my office with Tina and me to tell her the truth: that he did not believe he was her father, that he did not know who her father was, and that he did not want to have any more involvement with her. Period.

Again, there's way more to the story than I can go into here, but you might just be able to imagine the sense of devastation felt by this fourteen-year-old girl as she experienced the weight of her world come crashing in on her as she heard the truth that she had not wanted to face.

And yet – and it wasn't a short or an easy road, but – over time and with much counseling and prayer and interactions with patient, compassionate people in her life who cared about her, healing did occur in Tina's heart. The rage gradually subsided, the rough exterior gradually softened, and she began to attach herself to people whom she loved and who loved her. Eventually, some two years after that first interaction that I had with Tina on the front porch of Bacon Cottage, she left the children's home to move into the home of a deeply committed Christian woman, a single professional person who had never had children, who adopted Tina as her own after working for almost a year to build a relationship with her.

Tina needed to hear the truth in order for transformation to occur in her life.

This is the third Sunday this month that we have focused on the lectionary text from one of the prophets: first Hosea, then Isaiah, and this morning Jeremiah. Speaking the truth is what God called the biblical prophet to do. More specifically, speaking the truth in order for transformation to occur. Much as with what happened with Tina, God cannot give us new life without first ridding us of the old.

Telling the truth isn't easy to do. Frankly, I don't know many people who are eager to engage in the hard and mostly thankless job of truth-telling, particularly if the truth brings pain to those with whom it is shared and therefore tough times for the one who shares it.

The text tells us that Jeremiah was “only a boy” when God told him that he wanted him to speak the truth. He was young. We don’t know exactly how young since the Hebrew word can mean any age from infant to a teen. Little else is known for sure beyond a few short verses at the beginning of the book that has his name. We know that he came from Anathoth, the village to which David’s friend and priest, Abiathar, was banished by King Solomon.

We aren’t told just where he was when God called him into the truth-telling business. We only know that God is the one who initiated the encounter: “The Lord came to me,” he says. This isn’t a passionate teenager away on a religious retreat, seeking to hear the voice of God. Much like Abraham, Moses, and Gideon before him, it was God who drafted him, calling him by name as he did so.

This is likely not a commission that Jeremiah would have chosen for himself. His family lineage likely would have prepared him to be a priest, to offer sacrifices in the temple, to pronounce God’s blessing on those who came to worship. He could have made a decent living and lived a nice, quiet life as the senior pastor of the religious institution. Certainly he would not have sought the call to proclaim God’s judgment upon the people and the destruction of the temple. For most anyone and especially from one as young as he was, this must have been a terrifying experience for Jeremiah.

He tried to get out of it. “You’ve picked the wrong guy, God. I’ve not even been to Toastmasters yet. I’m not the one to carry this out. I get tongue-tied. I’m very nervous about public speaking.”

“It’s OK,” God replies. “I’ll put the words in your mouth and I’ll be with you to deliver you.”

And it was this promise of God to be with him that turned the tide for Jeremiah from fear and self-doubt to a sense of empowered obedience. God had more confidence in Jeremiah than Jeremiah had in himself and Jeremiah came to understand that it wasn't about his own abilities or his flaws. He came to understand that it wasn't about Jeremiah at all. It was about God. And it always is. God is not willing to allow any of us to live a lie because living the lie will bring with it its own destruction and keep us from moving ahead on the path of wholeness and fulfillment and peace that God wants for all of us.

Jeremiah was called by God to speak the truth. And so is the church. The church is called to be God's prophetic voice in the world, to speak the counter-cultural word of God, to call the world's systems and power structures, the world's values and priorities, the world's assumptions and status quo into question, to point to the truth that if the world continues living in the fantasy that what it is embracing will lead to a full and complete life, it is mistaken and is instead on the way to bringing about its own destruction.

In a world that is riddled with armed conflict, with a tendency to jump to the use of force over the use of diplomacy, God calls us to live as those who are not "anti-war," but rather "pro-peace," practicing what we believe is right rather than merely condemning those whom we think are wrong. God calls us to model "the more excellent way" of mercy and compassion, of forgiveness and love.

In a world where "money is power" and social status is seen by many as the highest goal to reach, God calls us to be advocates for the poor, the disabled, the disenfranchised, the ones whose concerns and needs usually are the first to be erased from public budgets and the collective consciousness.

In a world in which human characteristics such as race and nationality and gender and sexuality and religion often bring discrimination and judgment and condemnation upon individuals by the larger society and even by those who consider themselves followers of Jesus, God calls us to develop compassionate hearts that lead us into dialogue with one another and that remind us that even in our differences we are part of the largest family that there is: the human family, loved beyond description by its heavenly parent.

The church of Jesus Christ is called by God to expose the false idols that coax us into a fantasy that is not true by pointing to the one, true God and to the power of his Word. Let's be honest with one another this morning and admit that often that is not an easy thing to do. Who is eager to do that? It's much easier, much more palatable to blend in to the background of the world around us and to embrace the fantasy that just is not true.

But God is not willing to allow us to do that without the prodding of his Spirit lurking all around us. God is not willing for the truth to go unspoken. I doubt that any of us here this morning is called to be a prophet of biblical proportions. I doubt that any of us is called to be a Jeremiah. I don't doubt, though, that each of us at various points in our lives is called to make hard decisions, to proclaim painful truths, to expose harmful lies, to live by standards that are not popular, to choose priorities and make life choices that point to a different way.

God never says that following the way of his leading would be the easy way. He did say it would be the most fulfilling way. He also promised that when we do it we will walk the path with his sustaining presence, that in the midst of our fears and self-doubts and insecurities is the knowledge that the God who made us has breathed into us his Holy Spirit and believes in us more than we believe in ourselves. When we find the courage to speak

the truth that ultimately liberates those who embrace it, that courage comes from beyond us and reminds us that, finally, it is not about us.

It is about God. It is always about God.