

Letting God's Radical Truth In

One of the greatest ways that we miss the mark as humans is our intellectual pride. We think that we have it all figured out. We know what and who is right, and what and who is wrong. We know how our life and the lives of others should progress, and how God should act in accordance with those assumptions. And when things inevitably don't happen the way we think they should, we get upset, sometimes even angry at God.

If we find ourselves with a life that is floundering, either as a community or as individuals, it is because we have lost the way, lost the truth.

The people of God are no stranger to pride. All throughout the Old Testament, we see time and again a denial of God's way and an insistence on going their own way. After hundreds of years of pursuing their own truth, it took an exile from their homeland to bring the people to their knees and to set them on their way back to God.

Like the people of Israel at the time of the exile, it is essential that we let go of our pride of our insistence on playing God. We must humble ourselves and ask for the Holy Spirit to show us truth.

This is a prayer God answers. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Yet if we have been living from pride, Jesus' truth will overturn our reality in a very uncomfortable way. Jesus' teachings overturned what his listeners thought they understood. Jesus was radical. His teachings made some people very angry and completely upended the lives of others.

We miss the impact of these teachings, these parables. We've grown up hearing the words "Good Samaritan" so many times that we miss the shock value of the lesson. Even the story of the prodigal son doesn't have the same effect when you know how it ends before you hear the beginning. And the teaching of giving all you have to the poor and following Jesus...we've heard it so many times that we just blow right past it.

A few months ago, I had an undeniably Holy Spirit-given dream that had the shock value of Jesus' parables. The dream highlighted someone I had very strong opinions about and not a lot of respect for and completely flipped the script on me, with a clear directive for reforming my future behavior. I woke up understanding how someone hearing the parable of the good Samaritan would have felt.

The Holy Spirit's message slammed me hard. First, there was the shock of it. You want me to be more like WHO? Then, there was the take-home message. The parable-like dream rattled me. It shook me out of my comfort zone into the zone of God's truth.

Let's see if we can resurrect the shock value that the disciples would have felt from today's passages and let some of Jesus' radical truth reform our lives and thinking. (Potentially let congregation know about upcoming pauses for reflection)

In Luke 17: 3-4, Jesus teaches his disciples to forgive their repentant brothers seven times a day. You've heard this teaching before, repeatedly. It's no surprise that forgiveness is important to Jesus. But has this teaching lost its impact? Bring to mind someone who you believe has wronged you or someone you care about recently. Now imagine them repeating that offense 7 times in the same day and asking you to forgive them 7 times. Truly imagine it and feel the emotions rise up within you. How much inner strength and faith in God does it take to forgive them from the heart all seven times?

Why does Jesus require such radical forgiveness? Because judgment and anger with others keep us bound. When we keep others out of our hearts, we are denying ourselves our emotional freedom that is our inheritance as children of God. To enter the kingdom of heaven, we must allow ourselves to let go of judgment and of seeing ourselves as victims. Forgiveness isn't saying that what the person did is okay, or even forgotten. It isn't being a doormat. Forgiveness is emotionally letting it go so it doesn't eat you up inside. Forgiveness is realizing that the kingdom within you can't be shaken by anything "out there".

But our humanity makes this type of forgiveness, of fully residing in the kingdom within and releasing judgment and victimhood nearly impossible.

No wonder the disciples asked Jesus in the following verses to increase their faith. Jesus' answer to this request for faith is just as impactful as the teaching about forgiveness itself. Jesus tells the disciples that they need not just any faith, but the right kind of faith for the right kind of healing. The faith can be small—as small as the smallest seed, but if that faith is in an all-powerful God, it is enough. Jesus uses the example of the mulberry tree for a reason. The mulberry tree is known to have the strongest root system of any tree in Israel. Perhaps even stronger than our deeply rooted judgments and habits of thinking. Our wrong-thinking—our unforgiveness and anger, may feel as deeply rooted as that mulberry tree, and yet even a tiny, true connection born in faith to the all-powerful God can uproot it.

What is the mulberry tree in your life? What in your life needs to be uprooted?

We need pure-hearted faith in God and a genuine willingness to have the lies we believe in uprooted. The lies of false judgments of others, the lies about our worth and purpose, these need to go in order to make way for peace.

The next parable gives yet another critical piece of Jesus' radical wisdom. In this one, a servant, exhausted from hard work in the fields, is asked to first serve his master dinner before eating his own meal. And Jesus suggests that this is the correct expectation for our relationship to God. Like the servant, we can never do enough for God. Not because God is a harsh task master, but exactly the opposite...God is asking us to give up all that would stand between us and him. We can never obey Him or serve Him enough on this earth. Our choosing to sit back and serve our small, separate selves is proverbially shooting ourselves in the foot.

Forgiving our sister once might feel like enough, but God is asking us to let ALL roots of bitterness between us go. We are asked instead to realize our oneness with each other.

To give our Sunday mornings over to God might feel like a lot. But God wants our hearts every second of every day.

To tithe 10% might seem a sacrifice, but God wants to have dominion over everything that you have and use every penny for His glory, as He directs it.

This brings us back to truth. How can we see our oneness with each other? What does it mean to give our hearts to God continually and completely? And how do we know how to allocate our earthly resources?

The answer is simple but requires great inner strength and devotion: ask God to reveal His truth, be 100% committed to doing whatever it is that is revealed, and then trust Him to answer that prayer. God has answered this prayer 10 times out of 10 for me. Sometimes I receive the answers in dreams or in meditation, but 9 out of 10 times the answers come through life itself. I'll have someone reach out to me, hear something in church, or receive an invitation to serve and feel joy come into my heart when I see it. The key to finding truth is the intention to seek it with everything we have. And that truth leads us to reconciliation. Truth leads us to open our hearts wide to others and into meaningful service to the God within them. Earnestly seeking truth takes humility and great trust in God. It is scary to open our hearts the way Jesus teaches.

Perhaps the hardest and the first that comes to mind is in the area of politics. What if we opened our hearts to those we have hardened them against, not to change our minds or theirs, but to understand where they are coming from in love? If a single line from a speech is quoted by either side of the aisle, we can read the transcript or listen to the original speech—the full speech—and allow the Spirit to guide our thinking. And we ought not put any child of God out of our hearts, even if, after listening to God's leading, you see nothing of the truth in their words or actions. We can even speak God's revealed truth and take action without holding anger or bitterness inside us.

On matters of religion, read or listen to the Bible for yourself, cover to cover so you see the fullness of God's story. And while you're at it, read the works of other faiths as well and see if God's truth shines through, perhaps painted with different hues.

When praying, don't just toss up a prayer and walk away, determined that you know that what you've requested is what God should do. Pause and take the time—maybe even a full 30 minutes, to sit in silence and listen to God.

When working with family strife, fully hear, without judgment, to your loved ones' perspective. Understand that their pain or anger is a cry for help, not an indictment of you.

And when you are determining how much to give to what cause, including to our pledge drive, stop thinking you know God's will and listen. It might be more, less, or in a different arena of giving than you expect. Only God knows what this next year will hold for you and your family and only God knows His will for your life and His resources.

All these things take time, but a genuine seeking for God's way is the pearl of great price, the treasure in the field that Jesus speaks of in yet another parable.

Surrender your ideas of what is and what should be, seek truth, be willing to serve God fully and completely, and put your complete faith in Him.

If you want to change the world, start within. Let God change you. Let the radical teachings of Jesus change all of our hearts. May His Kingdom come, may His will be done. Amen