

Telling the Truth

As a pastor, Doug, there are many challenges that face you. I can only imagine what some of them are, or how they feel to you. You see, we expect so much sometimes. We expect that you be an exemplary husband and father to, a Bible scholar, an effective counselor, a prayer warrior, a good communicator, and an able administrator. Those are all challenges, and not bad challenges, but I expect that they are not where you need to focus your attention. They are not the main challenge.

The main challenge, it seems to me, is to tell the Truth. That seems simple enough, doesn't it? So simple, that it almost goes without saying. And yet, it's not so easy to tell the truth.

Jesus says "I am the truth." He also prefaces what he will say on so many occasions with the phrase "I tell you the truth." So the truth is both the object of and subject of our faith. The truth matters.

As Frederick Buechner says, the truth of the gospel is tragedy, comedy, and fairy tale – I'll admit, funny words to hear used of the Gospel. It's tragedy because it tells us that the world is fallen, that we are fallen, that even on our best of days, we are sinful through and through. Sometimes we can pretend that the world isn't so bad, that we aren't so bad, at least not relative to most. You have the unenviable challenge of reminding us that yes, the world is as bad as we could have thought, that we are sinful, even when we think our motives are pure. It's not pleasant, it won't make you popular, but it is necessary to say, because the Gospel has to be bad news before it is good news. We have to be shaken.

But you can't leave us there. You also have the pleasant task of declaring the comedy of the gospel. That's not a "ha, ha" kind of comedy, but it's the amazing grace of a Creator who actually condescended to live among his creations, the one who undoes the curse of sin every day. It's comic because it's so unforeseeable. It's like Sarah laughing when she bore Issac in her old age. She laughed at the supernatural work of grace in her life. You have the joy of reminding us that there is no sin we can't be saved from, no situation in which a glimpse of God's incredible grace can't be seen.

But better yet, you have the challenge of telling us about the fairy tale the Gospel is, and by that, Buechner didn't mean it *was* a fairy-tale but that it is *like* a fairy tale in that it tells us of a magical place where right will prevail and where we will all live happily ever after. It gives us a glimpse of Joy, of Home, of where we really belong and where we really long for. You have the challenge of holding out that hope to us, because we need that hope, because no matter how we see grace breaking into our tragic world we need to be reminded that we live in the shadow of Reality, of Heaven. Real life is yet to come.

You tell us the truth then – the whole truth and nothing but the truth – the gospel as tragedy, as comedy, and as fairy tale.

But you have one more truth to tell us, one that will help us listen to you, and that's the truth of *You*. We read in Scripture that Jesus wept. He went to parties. He enjoyed food and people of every stripe. He was hungry. He despaired of life. He laughed at life. Do we have any doubt that he laughed? He was human. And because he was human, we can identify with him. We can find ourselves in Him.

You are for me but the most recent in a long chain of pastors I have had. And (no offense intended), many of your sermons will join that long string of forgotten sermons I have heard. But what I do remember most from my pastors are those refreshing moments when the pastor became a human being, when he shed his pastor face and came down from the pulpit, figuratively speaking, and said or did something that reminded me that he was, after all, pretty much like me. Maybe that's the harder thing, to let yourself be yourself and not what you think you ought to be, to point one finger at yourself while you are pointing us to Jesus at the same time. Then we can listen. Then we can hear what you say.

This reminds me of a conversation Doug and I had this week. You all should know that Doug has quite a recall, a memory to rival any child's. This week at lunch he recounted in detail the entire plot along with dialog (have you ever envied adults who could do that??) of a recent rerun of that series called "The Wonder Years," you know, the one about the mid-60s suburban family – Kevin, and Norma, and Kevin's dad. He said to me, "what was it about that show that hold such an attraction to us?" And I said it's because it rings true to us; the characters there are so like us and others we have known in so many ways. Maybe the particulars of the story are different than my life, but when we see it, we know exactly what is going on. We've been there. We *are* Kevin, or Kevin's dad, or Norma. That's what makes it so powerful.

Well, perhaps our lives really aren't in their particulars like Jesus', or even yours, Doug, but we all know sorrow and joy, we all share some universal feelings, and the challenge is to help us see those connections and then point us to Jesus in the midst of whatever we feel.

Doing that with your life brings the Gospel closer, because you are telling us then that your life is tragic, like ours, warped by sin, even dark at times; but that amazingly enough, God has shown you grace, comic as it is; and that you, like us, long for the happy ending, that in the end, all will be set right as it is in every fairy tale.

So, telling the Truth really is a bigger challenge than you might think. It's what we all hunger for, what we all need, and what will one day find in Jesus. May God give you grace to tell the Truth.