

“Micro-Movements of Faith: Truth” by Rev. Dr. Peter Thompson Luke 13:1-9

\*Inspired and adapted from “*Preaching Toward True Repentance*” by Thomas Long, *Journal for Preachers*

At the beginning of this Lenten season, we were introduced to the charge and challenge of focusing on tiny things, micro-movements of faith, that compound on one another to create a sturdy life of discipleship in faithful (right) relationship with God. It is a charge that urges us to do the next right thing rather than try to do everything all at once. It is a charge that urges us to ask ourselves, “What is the smallest step that I can take, today, to move closer to God’s love?”

Last week then, with the help of Pete Rose, we focused on repentance, and more specifically, true repentance as being an essential and crucial micro-movement toward wholeness. We began with repentance because sin causes a breach in our lives that only God has the power to make whole and true repentance lines us up for the gift and power of God’s grace and mercy.

I don’t know about you, but I can tend to hear this and say, “Okay, sounds good” and then I am simply off to the next thing. Put another way, Thomas Long said, “Repentance has always come with a cost, but we find ourselves at the place where either we do not see the need for repentance, or, if we do, the cost seems too high for most of us to bear.” If either is true, then it suggests our hearts aren’t quite in it. We hear the words of repentance, but we do not hear much deep sorrow nor do we see much beating of the breasts that accompanies true remorse.

Therefore, today, we are encouraged to focus on truth as a micro-movement of faith that intersects with repentance. True repentance is only viable if it is indeed made up of the truth.

The truth is, we can sometimes be like the character in the old commercial, “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV.” “I’m not a true sinner, but I play one in worship.”

Stanley Hauerwas, “It remains the case that though we know we may be sinners, we have trouble taking that description of ourselves all that seriously. We know we are not perfect, but most of us think we are good enough. The truth is most of us are conventional people who lead good conventional lives. It is not at all clear to us that we are all that sinful, but as I suggested, we are willing to try to play being a sinner for God’s sake- at least at lent.”

And here comes Lent, demanding that we do more than play at remorse, do more than merely think deeply about the concept of sinfulness or meditate at length on the idea of repentance, but instead insisting that we actually do repent as an acknowledgement of the truth of sin being present in our lives; the truth that we repeatedly turn away from God toward the things that can capture our fleeting imaginations, toward the desires that lure us away from faith, sins that ensnare us and drag us down toward death.

Truth Be Told by Matthew West...

*Lie number one, you're supposed to have it all together  
And when they ask how you're doing  
Just smile and tell them, "Never better"  
Lie number two, everybody's life is perfect except yours  
So keep your messes and your wounds  
And your secrets safe with you behind closed doors  
But truth be told The truth is rarely told  
I say, "I'm fine, yeah, I'm fine, oh, I'm fine, hey, I'm fine", but I'm not  
I'm broken  
And when it's out of control I say, "It's under control", but it's not  
And you know it  
I don't know why it's so hard to admit it  
When being honest is the only way to fix it  
There's no failure, no fall  
There's no sin You don't already know  
So let the truth be told*

If being honest with God, repenting to God, is the only way to fix our sinful breach, then why are we so reluctant to do it? Don't we want that gap filled? One consideration is that we may not be accepting the true nature of our sin. Another consideration is that we may be utilizing a little comparative sinning to weigh the nature of our sin.

Most of us know we aren't perfect but, and I don't know about you, "I am convinced that I am nevertheless "good enough." Thomas Long (pastor and author) shares a story about a time he was with a group of peers in a study work group. They found themselves one day wrestling with a biblical text that included the word "wicked." One pastor in the group balked at the term, saying, "You know, I don't think of myself as wicked. There are wicked people in the world, I'll admit, but I am not one of them." The rest of the group knew what the pastor meant and indeed felt some kinship. Long offers, "All of us were ready to admit that we were sinners, at least in the mild sense that we occasionally are short-tempered with others, often more self-centered in our desires than we should be, sometimes reluctant to show love to difficult people, that sort of sin. But wicked? None of us had committed murder, embezzled funds, or planted a terrorist bomb. Like having Covid, we

were ready to admit that we were infected with the disease of sin, but that we, thankfully, had only mild symptoms. Wicked we were not.”

Here is the thing. This is a misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the nature of sin. The bible speaks of a common human experience of deception, rebellion, and treachery. The stories of our ancestors falling in the Garden of Eden and at other times are not historical accounts of some pollution of sin that enters the river of history at a certain point and flows onward to stain our own experience today. The truth of original sin, the sin we read about in the Garden of Eden, is true because it is always true, every day, about us all. The stories of sin we encounter in scripture are existential stories in which we recognize the way it is with human beings.

We need to admit that we live in a society, despite many efforts of ethical people, that is nevertheless, writes Herbert McCabe, “based on fear- driven by fear of poverty, starvation, prison, torture, and killing.” This fear is not the exception to the rule, the fly in the ointment. This fear is, in fact, the water in the aquarium, the world in which we live.

“This is what, in John’s gospel, Jesus calls “the World.” This what we are born into. This is what we are enmeshed in... When we speak of “original sin” we are not referring to some ancient and original sin of our first parents... but when we speak of original sin we mean the sin we have from our own origin in this world: not a sin we have committed, but a distortion of our world which leads us away from God, a distortion that leads us, when we encounter love, to crucify it.”

The truth is we participate in this distortion and have the inclination to push away the love of God. Maybe you are thinking of the old hymn, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.” And here is a hard truth for me to swallow, maybe you too: to create a class of people who are genuinely wicked, people who are worse sinners than me, is simply a way of deflecting blame away from myself. Long writes, “All human wanderings and rebellions are springs that arise from the same underground river of death.”

Many Sundays during worship we are invited to confess our sins using a corporate prayer of confession. With those prayers is our (collective) admittance “that we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed... we have not loved God with our whole heart and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” Our corporate prayers of confession are not a time for comparative sinning: “Yeah, that person over there did this and they should repent.” This admittance is the honest to God truth of us all.

Sin is heavy. Do you feel it? I know I do. But... there is more. Thanks be to God there is more! The truth of our sin may be heavy, but there is another truth that is greater than our sin. We have a God who is able to lighten the load. We have a God who has defeated the nature of sin with the gift of eternal life.

Long writes, "To own the truth about our sin can be the soil in which compassion grows. Yes, there are murders and torturers, people who have lost their way so tragically that their destructiveness can be seen in dramatically cruel ways. But to know that we ourselves are lost in the same dark forest undercuts self-righteousness. A truthful acknowledgement of our sin also magnifies the wonder we experience in the face of God's mercy.... Salvation is not an hor d'oeuvre God offers to his best friends at a garden party; it is a rescue from death God performs for God's mortal enemies."

And to this truth, I will turn to another set of song lyrics for us to reflect.

The Truth by Megan Woods...

*How many times can you hear the same lie  
Before you start to believe it?  
The enemy keeps whisperin' to me  
I swear these days it's all that I'm hearin'  
I used to know who I was  
Now I look in the mirror, and I'm not so sure  
Lord, I don't wanna listen to the lies anymore*

*The truth is I am my Father's child  
I make Him proud and I make Him smile  
I was made in the image of a perfect King  
He looks at me and wouldn't change a thing  
The truth is I am truly loved  
By a God who's good when I'm not good enough  
I don't belong to the lies, I belong to You  
And that's the truth*

*When I feel like there's so much noise  
Livin' rent-free in my head  
Heaven finds me in a still small voice  
And it sounds like grace instead  
You remind me who I am  
When I look in the mirror, and I'm not so sure  
Lord, I don't wanna listen to the lies anymore*

*'Cause I know who You are  
And I hold Your truth inside of my heart  
I know the lies are always gonna try and find me  
But I've never been so sure*

*Finish with the chorus and make it personal...*

*The truth is you are God's child  
You make God proud and you make God smile  
You were made in the image of a perfect King  
God looks at you and wouldn't change a thing  
The truth is you are truly loved  
By a God who's good when you're not good enough  
You don't belong to the lies, You belong to God  
And that's the truth*

Perhaps the question we might be asking ourselves now is, "Can I accept this truth?" We will dive into this next week.