

Sermon for March 15, 2020 – “Can We Handle The Truth?”

3rd Sunday of Lent, Year A – Texts: Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 6:1-8, 18-21

Rev. Dr. Jeff Colarossi, Westwood First Presbyterian Church

Have you ever noticed how children can be honest? Sometimes brutally so until they are taught some social norms. I was thinking about a story that I'd read not that long ago about a pastor who went to the grocery store with her preschool-age son. They were making their way through the store the child going, “Mommy, can I have this? Mommy, can I have that? Mommy, if I'm really good, can I have a toy?” Those of you who are parents or were parents know the ritual. Finally, there was relative silence. The pastor/mom was thinking about what to make for dinner while the child was staring at the shelves to see what else he “needed.” Suddenly, a man in a wheelchair with no legs entered the aisle. Anticipating an outburst from her son who didn't yet understand the phrase “politically correct” the woman glanced down hoping the boy would be so busy checking out the frozen foods that he wouldn't notice the man wheeling toward them. Maybe the man would be so busy checking out the frozen foods he wouldn't notice them! Hope, hope, hope. Well, not this time! They both looked down the aisle at each other at the same time! Oh, no, pastor/mom thought here it comes! Some totally insensitive remark from her four-year-old which she knew was going to embarrass both her and the man. This is not going to be pretty she thought. Her son opened his mouth and took a breath still staring at the man with no legs in the wheelchair. She picked up her son and held on tightly hoping to make a quick exit down the bread aisle. She held him a little tighter. Then came the words she knew were going to embarrass them all, “Hey, let go of me mommy, you're hurting me!” The man's eyes went from the boy straight to her. She was absolutely right in knowing that she'd be embarrassed. However, the words she'd feared “Where are his legs?” or “What's wrong with him?” weren't the words that ultimately caused embarrassment. It was her ineffective wrong response to avoid the truth as she tried to control the situation and the response. The man had probably been in similar situations and he handled the whole thing better than pastor/mom did. Mom blushed, let go of her son and apologized to both of them. And that was it.

So, why tell that story? It seems innocent enough, right? Well, it initially caught my eye because of the truth that it revealed. Which is simply this, the truth is sometimes hard to hear. But, hey, kids usually don't have a problem telling people they're fat or are missing their legs or even that they're nice. So, for us it's not so much that we don't know the truth as it is that we may not want to acknowledge it. We live in a state of denial. The man knew his legs were gone. The fat person's probably been told before that he or she's overweight.

In our reading this morning from Isaiah something similar is going on. The prophet tells the people something they probably already know and don't want to hear. They're rebellious. They have the wrong attitude in their hearts and minds to make their fasts acceptable to God. Which sounds like something we should talk about during Lent, a time when lots of people give up things as an offering to God.

Their worship is unrighteous because the Israelites participate in only the **outward** actions of worship but not so much on the inward. They show up at the right times to worship and pray but what about the rest of the week? Do they seek the Lord's presence and blessing on Tuesday or Thursday? How do they seek God's face? Why do they pray? What is the state of their hearts? Jesus addressed similar problems. In our reading from Matthew's gospel Jesus gives instructions on how to fast, pray, and give. Don't bring attention to yourself that others will praise you and think you are perfect and wonderful above reproach and judgment, because you're none of those things.

Now, centuries later, has anything changed? We're told we need we should look like movie stars, be thin and attractive. It's acceptable to be in debt as long as you can make those monthly payments and have the right car in your driveway. If we make sacrifices at all they should be relatively small so as not to create too much discomfort. It's acceptable to turn away, or cross the street, in order to avoid the homeless, smelly people. If you're in church on Sunday morning for worship it's not necessary to attend a Bible study or participate in any fellowship or mission activity, folks work so hard to plan and put on. No, don't worry about it besides you did all that stuff before...right? After all, you plan to be in your pew again next week unless, of course, you have company over or have something better or more important to do. Besides, you can get church on TV. Yeah, just turn on Joel Osteen, you'll be fine!

I don't know, maybe it's just me but I think we need someone like Isaiah; someone bold enough to "shout out" without holding back to remind us of our sins. Am I right? Who's with me? It's okay. Anyway, I use the word **remind** because we probably already know we're sinning. We're probably hoping that since everyone else is doing it we're not too bad. We may be pinning our hopes on the that we do the right thing most of the time and may even hesitate before breaking any of the ten commandments. Which is ironic because the first commandment is to honor the Lord and keep the commandments! I suspect we know in our heart of hearts that we have much in common with those Israelites and first-century believers! Or perhaps we need a four-year-old. The pastor/mom's little boy didn't have a clue what he'd done in the frozen food aisle to merit being pulled into his mother's arms as he was. But, the man in the wheelchair did and so did pastor/mom. She tried to hide the truth. She tried to control it so she wouldn't be embarrassed. She was wrong. Much of the time – so are we.

So the next question is this, what are we going to do about it? It's an easy question to ask but a whole lot harder to answer. I believe the first step is to be honest and look at ourselves, deep within ourselves. In the grocery store pastor/mom began with an apology to her son, to the man, and to God.

The issue's not **how much** we sin, it's **when** and **why**! I'll be honest, until a few weeks ago I never gave it that much thought. But then I started thinking about it do we really think that God doesn't notice? Do we think that God doesn't care how **low** we've set the bar for ourselves? Do we really think God can't handle the truth? I'm pretty sure God can but I'm not so sure about us. Can we handle the truth when it comes to sin?

To be clear, I'm not talking about Sin in general. I mean, most people are actually quite good at pointing out other people's sins. I'm talking about our own. I'm guessing most of us have seen the movie *A Few Good Men*. How many of us have? I love that movie. Jack Nicholson as Colonel Jessup – awesome! I especially love, as I'm sure most of you do, Colonel Jessup's final courtroom rant which starts with one of the all-time great movie lines, "You can't handle the truth!" There was a time when I could recite that entire speech. I had lots more time to kill in those days. And for the record I think we want him on that wall...we need him on that wall! So I was thinking about it this week about all this and whether or not there's any truth to it. Can we handle the truth? I really think Colonel Jessup hit the nail on the head. So I'm asking...Can we? Can we handle the truth about our sin?

Part of me feels that some of us really don't want to know the truth because we believe that we cannot – in fact – handle the truth. We feel better off if we don't know it so that way life can go on as normal (whatever that is), where we "think" we have everything figured out or at least know how to **cope** with our dysfunctions. To find out something isn't true or to finally learn the truth about something throws us all out of rhythm. We don't like hearing the truth because then we may have to deal with it and it's easier if we don't. It's easier – but not always better. I'd go so far to say that it actually **is** harder! Because now we have to work that much harder to suppress the truth. And unfortunately we tend to take the easy road. But that famous statement, "You can't handle the truth!", makes me think of another famous person who said what seems to be the opposite, "The truth will set you free." Sound familiar? It should. We talked about it last week. For the record, Jesus said it in Chapter 8 of John's Gospel.

So which is it? Who are we going to believe here? A character from a movie or the Son of the Living God, the Word Made Flesh who lived among us full of grace and truth? It's up to you but I think the choice is clear. So many times we believe we "can't handle the truth" so we bury our heads in the sand and choose to ignore it. Unfortunately when we pull our heads out whatever the 'truth' is it's still there waiting for us. Ignoring things or putting them off will only make matters worse. But the truth will set us free. How powerful is that statement?!? A very close friend of mine recently admitted that he's an alcoholic. He began the twelve-step process and has been sober for almost six months now. Admitting the truth about our addictions, our relationships, our problems, and all kinds of sin is the first step in finding true freedom. There's a reason Alcoholics Anonymous has people start by stating their name and that they're an alcoholic. There's freedom in admitting the truth. Let me put it this way, how many of us when asked "How are you?" will say "Fine" even when it's not? Telling someone that everything isn't alright brings freedom, and it's okay to do so. You've heard me say repeatedly that we're commanded to "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ." But beyond being willing to bear someone else's burdens we must be willing to allow others to bear ours! And if things get tough don't leave or take a break from the church like some people do. I will never understand that, and it drives me crazy! The church is the one place where we ought to be able to go for help and find the truth.

That's the kind of church I believe people need and are looking for. I believe it's the kind of church we **need** to be and **can** be. If we're willing to try God will be with us and people will find us. As a pastor and as a friend I want nothing more than to see individuals, couples, and families live in the freedom that only the truth of Christ can bring.

This world needs a few good men **and** women willing to face reality and with Christ's help you **can** handle the truth. I guarantee the freedom that comes with the truth is well worth it!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.