

For the people of St. Philip's

July 12, 2009

Year B, Proper 10

Maria Hoecker, preacher

So, it appears from our Gospel reading that the question for today is.....Who wants your head on a platter? Isn't that a pleasant thought?!? When is truth telling worth having your head cut off?

It's been my observation that there are two types of people who are annoying. The first type: people who can never be trusted to tell the truth. The second type: people who tell it like it is.

Pathological liars are not to be trusted for obvious reasons. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung once noted that there were only two kinds of people he could not "cure:" schizophrenics and compulsive liars. Both are compelled to create alternative realities that harm themselves and others.

The other group of folks who annoy us are those who DO tell the truth. They see right through our daily disguises, our fake facades. We don't like them because the truth they speak can be destroy our carefully constructed image of ourselves.

It's hard to know which of these two kinds of people offends us more: the liar or the truth-teller.

Can you remember the first time you got in trouble for telling the truth? You were probably five years old.

Surely every one has a story of a five year old in their life who spoke the obvious. There's the story of the Emperor's New Clothes..... Or there's the story of a child who was visited by an aunt. She asked the child's mother why the children never came over to visit and play. The listening child helpfully chimed in, "I know the answer to that . . . Because my mother says your house is dirty."

We carefully teach our five year olds that there is a place for the niceties of white lies (an

odd euphemism) For some reason most of us gently instruct our wise children that sometimes what folks don't know won't hurt them. We must be carefully taught.

Whatever you call it, most of us learn the social dance that enables us to keep what we're thinking to ourselves. There are times when it's not worth upsetting folks by telling them what we are really thinking. Those who fail to learn this social two-step are likely to find that they are always putting their foot in their mouth, another odd euphemism...and likely they are often caught up in unexpected domestic conflicts with their heads served on a platter.

Truth be told? We usually don't want the truth to be told...

So guess what? We're in the midst of a General Convention!!! Talk about truth-telling on a massive level. As Deacon Annie mentioned last week, the theme for this triennial convention is "ubuntu ~ I am because you are." There has been a concerted effort with this church convention to designate time for a public narrative project that is shared amongst the deputies and bishops. This involves truth telling, sharing personal narratives, and making eye-to-eye contact with neighbors. Time is being set aside at our church's national convention for large groups of people to talk about important controversial issues long before resolutions are put to a vote.

There has also been a concerted effort with this convention to invite as many primates from other provinces in the Anglican Communion to come to our convention and see how we operate. Our polity in TEC reflects the United States' experience of governance. Other Anglican Churches in far-flung parts of the world, even England, don't govern the way we do. Our form of governance has brought many innovations to The Episcopal Church, including the ordination of women. TEC is unique from other provinces in the Anglican Communion. Our House of Bishops and our House of Deputies vote on resolutions which are presented when we gather with elected delegates every three years. Other churches in the Anglican Communion don't do it that way. That's part of why we're all having so much confusion about authority in the Anglican Communion. So, The Episcopal Church has invited others to watch us and see how we prayerfully conduct the business of the church. We're not implying that other churches should do things like we do, we're just saying, here's how it is for us here. We're sort over that whole colonial rule concept, like 200 years ago.

Ubuntu~ I am because you are. We learn from our visitors too. We learn how our actions affect others by watching their reactions and looking at each other eye to eye as we share our experiences of our faithful decision-making and worship.

It's the double-edged sword of truth telling.

I have a friend who is a priest from the diocese of South Carolina. The diocese of South Carolina is fully present at General Convention this year, we are all very glad for this, but they are conflicted about being a minority voice now that some of their like-minded brothers in the dioceses of Fort Worth, San Joachim, and Pittsburgh have left the Episcopal Church. Mind you, those three diocesan deputations and interim bishops are fully present at convention. No dioceses have left the Episcopal Church, just a few bishops have departed with a group of followers. They've shaken the dust off their feet and moved on. We bid them peace. New faces have appeared out of those dioceses, many whose voices were previously suppressed. Our own retired bishop, Bob Johnson is now the interim bishop for the diocese of Pittsburgh until Pittsburgh can elect a new bishop. Diocesan boundaries are geographical, not ideological.

In hearing my brother priest's story out of South Carolina, I can feel that it's not easy to be the minority voice who must speak the truth. Truth has many nuances that flow from the experience of the truth teller. Minorities see things differently than those who hold power. The truth is that all voices and faithful experience are vital to the whole. I am because you are. In a sublime twist of the Holy Spirit, those who have held the power in our church for many many years seemingly are in a position of not being heard, and those who's voices have been suppressed seemingly are in control of the agenda. Ain't that just the way it goes with the Gospel truth?

So what does this have to do with John the Baptist? John spoke the truth to some folks who didn't want to hear what he had to say. Being Jesus' cousin and Baptizer didn't protect John from getting his head cut off when he spoke with conviction that wrongs had been committed. Of course John was right, he said what he had to say, that's plain and clear. He was martyred. He came to the table all right, his head came on a platter. He said what had to be said, and he paid the consequences.

What is not quite so clear is how we faithfully tell the truth in our own day to day lives. Sometimes the truth isn't cut and dried, sometimes white lies aren't helpful. I believe

truth lies in the spaces of silence between our stories of faith and conviction. When do we say what we believe with conviction, and when do we listen for awhile and earnestly try not to say what we really think?

I don't know.

One thing is clear. We need each other. I am because you are. We live in a country and within a church that values diversity in thought, word, and deed. We set a messy Table sometimes. We take years to figure things out as we openly argue and worship together. In fact the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, told folks at Anaheim this week that he is concerned that The Episcopal Church's polity slows down decision making because of its shared legislative process and three year convention cycle. We don't have a group of bishops who call the shots in our church and it is the opinion of the ABC that it slows everything down. Of course the immediate response to that is, "excuse me? And when is it that the English plan to consecrate female bishops?! 2012?" What's the hurry?!

Thank goodness, in the fullness of time, the Holy Spirit will reveal its truth to God's churches. In the mean time, we passionately engage in conversations that ripple out beyond our lifetimes. As we say in the Godly Play classrooms, we have all the time we need. Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We are one in the Body of Christ. As Paul states so beautifully we are many members of that Body. At Pentecost we came to know that we don't all speak the same language and that's ok. We can understand each other if we listen through the Holy Spirit. We are commissioned to be truth-tellers, speak our hearts, and stick together. We can trust that God's truth will be revealed in the fullness of time.

I am because you are. Amen.