

Beloved Creator, we come to you this morning in profound need of your truth. Give us the courage to pursue difficult truths and give us the radical hope to tell those truths boldly. In the name of your child, Jesus, who is our redeemer and friend, Amen.

I want to give a little heads up first thing this morning that in this sermon I'll be touching briefly on topics like the #MeToo movement and intimate partner violence. I won't however discuss them at length or with graphic language. This is a difficult topic for everyone. But if this is a particularly difficult topic for you, for any reason, please make sure to practice some self care, whatever that may look like to you. Our prayers and support are with you. You're not alone.

Today's scripture says, "dear children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action... Not in word or speech, but in *truth* and *action*. This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in God's presence."

You might find it a little strange—I certainly find it a little strange—that on a day that we are talking about the topic "Truths Worth Seeking" I've chosen a scripture that's more about love than it is about truth. Because if someone has ever told you a really inconvenient or difficult truth about yourself you know that it doesn't really feel a whole lot like love. That's the kind of biting thing about truth. It's uncompromising.

And yet the author of this scripture passage tells us to love one another. Not with words, but with actions. Not with speech, but with truth. And so I suspect the author is telling us that our love must be as concrete as our actions and as *uncompromising* as the truth.

Now if you're anything like me, you have a healthy and active relationship with doubt and skepticism and when people start talking about truth and certainty it makes you a little uncomfortable. Often times, those who are most prepared to hurt and commit violence against others are also the most sure of themselves, rarely willing to take a step back and question their own beliefs. And so you might also join me in sometimes drifting a little too far the other direction, into a polite relativism that avoids talking about truth at all so as not to say something controversial or upsetting. This is almost just as bad.

But the kind of truth I want to talk about this morning, the truth that matters most, isn't the same thing as certainty, in fact sometimes it's the opposite of certainty. Sometimes truth has the capacity to unsettle and disrupt other truths we take for granted.

There is a long-standing tradition of truth-telling and action-taking in the Bible. In the Old Testament there were women and men called prophets who noticed when the poor and the widows and the foreigners were exploited, and they chose to stand up boldly and tell the truth

about it. The cost of telling the truth was high in ancient Judea, just as it is today. Often those with the greatest power and wealth looked for ways to silence or kill truth-tellers. The prophets were often exiled, ridiculed, or rejected by the very community they were trying to save.

Then in the New Testament things change a little bit. Although the cost of truth-telling and action-taking remains high, we no longer see single, isolated individuals doing it by themselves. But instead, entire communities of Jesus followers are standing up and speaking truth to power. Jesus certainly told the truth about injustice. But he also invited his followers to join in the tradition of the prophets by publicly rebuking evil and exploitation.

Today we live in a society where propaganda and fake news threaten the well-being and even the lives of so many people, but particularly undocumented people, refugees, Black and Brown people, the Trans and Queer communities, women, impoverished people, children, and those without housing. In an era when access to information is so readily available, who could have predicted that misinformation would be so prevalent? It's clear that those who benefit the most from injustice are also the most invested in spreading lies. So the world has never needed truth tellers as deeply as it needs them today.

I stand in awe and gratitude before this community and the truth-telling that is already happening here. Whether through writing, praying, marching, speaking, volunteering, donating, or nonviolent direct-action protesting, you all have testified to the world that justice for the marginalized and peace for everyone are the central pillars of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And in so doing, you are joining in that long-standing tradition of prophetic voices.

But before any one of us can stand up and be a truth-teller, we have to develop an intimate relationship with the truth. Now that's not the same thing as knowing all the answers. In fact, probably the first step on the journey toward seeking truth is admitting what we don't know

I've been going to seminary in New York City for two years now. And the name of the degree that I am working on is called a "Master of Divinity." And if that's not about the most impressive sounding name for a degree then I don't what is... "Master of Divinity." So when I tell folks that what I'm going to school for my "Master of Divinity," they usually expect me to know a whole lot of answers to their questions about God and spirituality and especially what happens to us when we die.

But the truth is, I don't know more than anyone else about any of those things. There are a couple of things I *think* I know about God but I've been wrong before and I'll be wrong again. So while I've learned *a whole lot* in my short time in seminary, many of the answers I thought I knew have been replaced with questions. So I just want to prepare you now, lest the whole

“Master of Divinity” title raises your expectations a little too high, I am woefully unprepared to stand in front of you this morning and talk about capital “T” Truth.

But I do know a thing or two about what it means to *seek* the truth— to wrestle with it, to be transformed by it, and on occasion to tell it when it matters most. And the first thing I know about seeking the truth is this: it’s hard. And there’s really no way around it. I’m a lazy person by nature. If there was an easy to seek the truth, I would have found it by now.

But those are the truths that are most worth seeking, aren’t they? The difficult ones, I mean, the life-changing ones, the life-*interrupting* ones. I’m talking about the truths that sit at the very core of our beings. The ones that sting when we say them out loud, even if we’re only saying them to ourselves. Because ultimately, this scripture passage reminds us, that our ability to tell the truth, the most important truths, grows out of our capacity to love others and ourselves.

But truth is something you have to get down in the mud and wrestle with, kind of like when Jacob wrestled with God in the book of Genesis. And like Jacob, it’s very possible the truth may leave you limping for the rest of your life. If your truth is easy, if it’s convenient, if serves all your needs – then your truth probably isn’t the truth. Nothing about God or the world or community is easy or convenient. Keep wrestling.

And for that matter, even when you’ve found the truth, keep wrestling. Truth is not stagnant. *God* is not stagnant. They are dynamic, free-flowing, evasive, and powerful. And I promise you there will always be more to learn.

I don’t know if it’s more accurate to say that I chose Christianity because I believe it’s true or to say that I’m trapped in a headlock by God’s grace, and despite all my best attempts I can’t manage to free myself. And I’m well aware that we are all people of God’s peace so please feel free to substitute another metaphor here instead of wrestling. But the point is, there is something here, in this living breathing community of Jesus-followers, that is so profoundly and powerfully true that it refuses to let go of me.

Which brings me to my next point about seeking the truth: You can’t do it alone. We fundamentally need one another. It’s so important that we learn to use our voices and tell our story and speak our truths. But that is only one narrative in a whole world of possible stories. The truth is so much bigger than any one of us, so we need as many stories as possible. And not just stories that look and sound like ours. We need stories that are dramatically different.

Because the specificity of our own particular lives and journeys allow us to see *some* truths but prevent us from seeing others. I was first introduced to feminism in an English class at McCaskey High School where I was assigned novels like *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *The*

*Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. It was through that class that I first became aware that because of my social location as a white man, I had been taught by this society to believe that I had an objective relationship with the truth. But in reality, the social advantages that have been handed to me because of my race and gender actually prevent me from seeing the truth clearly in so many ways. So when I say that I need the stories and perspectives of others if I'm to have any chance of understanding the truth, I mean that quite literally.

This is actually a very traditional part of Mennonite theology— it is essential that we read and interpret the Bible together as a community. Because if we do it on our own, we're likely to start believing that *our* interpretation is the only possible one. And when that happens, not only do we tend to get it wrong, but we miss out on a whole world of deeper understandings and richer meanings. That's also why we have a time for response after the sermon, so that I don't get to come up here and deliver a lecture and take the last word. But rather, this sermon is one part of a larger conversation we're having together. My worship professor, Dr. Carvalhaes once said in class that if you want to know what a church *really* believes about sharing power, pay attention to whether they share the microphone.

But just as much we need community if we are to have some hope of understanding the truth, our communities and societies *need* the truth if they are going to survive and even thrive. This is the critical part of truth telling and for that reason it's the most important. Because if we are building a world where there is justice for everyone, then truth-telling about injustice is the first step.

This is an area in which Mennonites historically have not been so strong. Like any community, we tend to preserve positive parts of our history while strategically burying the problematic parts. I think this is starting to change, but in the past there has been a culture in Mennonite communities of not rocking the boat by revealing difficult truths. And only now are we beginning to confront some injustices that been hidden from view for decades. Those difficult stories need to be kept alive if we have any hope of learning from them and overcoming them.

Right now, in the entertainment industry, people of all genders, but particularly women, are courageously speaking out at great risk to themselves about the sexual violence they've endured at the hands of powerful men. Often these men are repeat-offenders who are capable of carrying out predatory and violent actions because they have surrounded themselves with communities who prefer comfortable lies over difficult truths.

And frankly we as a society tend to prefer silence and complicity when survivors begin to tell the truth about what they've experienced. The fact that the man who holds the highest office in this country is a self-proclaimed predator is all the evidence we need to show that this nation is pretty comfortable with sexual violence. So I believe that the test of any community's

commitment to the truth lies in whether or not it empowers and supports survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual abuse to tell their stories, if and when they are ready to do so.

Additionally truth-tellers here in Lancaster are courageously speaking out about the ways they've been impacted by police violence and racial profiling after an officer was filmed tasing Sean Williams, who was unarmed and complying with orders. Even though the investigation into the officer is ongoing, the Mayor has already announced that he won't be fired or suspended. Again, violence like this is only made possible in communities who prefer to hide the truth than see it come to light.

This is why I picked a scripture about love to talk about truth. Because in an historic moment like one, it is far too easy to love with words and not actions, with speech but not truth. But fundamentally, our commitment to love one another is a commitment to tell and seek the truth. And our commitment to truth is a commitment to love. Injustice thrives when there is a lack of truth. That is why Jesus calls us to the holy work of wrestling with and revealing truth. Because we will never build a more just and peaceful world without it.

“You will know the truth,” says Jesus, “and the truth will set you free.”