

The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey Lee
 The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
 Proper 19B, September 15, 2024
 St. Paul's Episcopal Church

Telling Truth

When I was six years old I had an accident. On the kindergarten playground, on a sunny day in the middle of January I fell on some ice and damaged my front teeth. For a while I pretended it didn't hurt and I kept on playing, but when the bell rang and I went inside my teacher took one look at me, blanched, and called my mother. She came right over, similarly blanched at the sight of my mouth, and took me straight away to the dentist. Only then did I begin to cry. (A reaction to the dentist, I have to say, that I have not entirely outgrown).

The dentist did not blanch when he looked at my teeth, but he said they would have to come out. Right then. Well, the crying started in earnest then. My good dentist reminded me that I was a big boy and that there really wasn't anything to be afraid of (as I sat there looking at all the dental paraphernalia on his little shelf). He stood right there, looked me straight in the eye and said, "Come on, this isn't going to hurt a bit."

It was at that moment that the terrible realization first dawned on me that adults could lie.

My mother, who was a wise woman, took over at that instant. She led me out into the waiting room and told me the truth. "This is going to hurt some," she said. "But if we don't do it, it's going to be a lot worse and you might lose your big teeth too."

Much of what passes for religion in our world is an attempt – sometimes thinly veiled, sometimes not – an attempt to convince us that it's not going to hurt a bit. That life isn't or doesn't have to hurt a bit, that God and a relationship with God won't hurt a bit. And when religion turns into that it turns into a lie. I wonder if the temptation to turn the Christian faith into a kind of extra strength religious Tylenol stems from too many well intentioned early conversations that never get a chance to grow up. We all know the scenario: the precocious 4 year old comes to us with one of "those" questions: "Why did Mary's cat die? Where is God ... *really?*" And we, the flustered but caring adults, respond with some answer about God and fluffy clouds that we may intend to be comforting, but aren't really sure we believe ourselves.

I'll never forget the look of horror and then relief on the face of a young mother once when I told her that I thought it was OK to tell her wondering 5 year old daughter that she didn't know the answer to her hard question about God. It was alright, in fact it was better for Mom to admit to her daughter that she had the same questions herself and that maybe they could wonder and ask God about it together. Her daughter then asked her Mommy to pray with her. And 5 year old knew that her Mother was telling her the truth.

Life is full of unanswerable questions. I don't believe the roadside billboards that scream, "Jesus is the answer!" Jesus Christ is not an instant remedy for the pain and ambiguity of life. In the scene in today's gospel, Jesus asks his friends, "Who do people say that I am?" And Peter, typically, gives the billboard answer: "Why, you're the Christ, God's Anointed One. You're THE ANSWER, the greatest. God has sent you to make it all better." And Jesus' response is strange. He doesn't deny what Peter says. But he tells all of them not to tell people all that about him – he tells them not to put out any bumper stickers or billboards. And Jesus uses a very different term for himself than Peter's. Jesus doesn't refer to himself as the Christ, *Christos*, God's Anointed One (the official religious answer). No, he calls himself the Son of Man. One of us. A human. And he says that he, the Son of Man, must suffer, be rejected by all the proper religious people of the day, and even be killed. And then raised.

Peter is horrified and starts to take Jesus to task. "Jesus, how could you say such things – that'll never happen to you. You're THE ANSWER." And in some of the harshest words attributed to him, Jesus tells Peter to get out of his way. "Get behind me, Satan! You're not on God's side; you're on the side of human beings." Maybe the bumper sticker should read, "Jesus is the question."

A theologian I know wrote, "We didn't crucify Jesus because he was God. We crucified him because he claimed to be God and then failed to come up to our standards for assessing the claim." (Robert Capon) We didn't want to be saved in our humanity, we wanted to be fished out of it. And that is the one thing God refuses to do.

This life has more than its share of hurts and heartaches. The world in which we live has teeth. And the Christian faith is not an escape hatch. It is not a holy insurance policy against disaster and pain. Far from it. And that's what makes following the Christian way so challenging ... and so genuinely life-giving. It isn't an escape from life; it's a way of living in deeper and broader and truer ways than we can imagine. Following Jesus isn't like the White Queen in Alice in Wonderland, believing six impossible things before breakfast. It isn't about tending polite religious facades. It isn't about living in religious illusions. It's about facing the truth. The truth of our lives – with all the pain and the joy, all the mess and the occasional glories. All of it. Facing who we really are and knowing that there is no pain, no fear, no hurt, no hard question that God has not already embraced in Jesus.

God never lies to us. This life, this world is going to hurt. Living hurts. Loving hurts. It means giving up control – to really live means letting go of our lives in a very real sense. It means dying a little. Dying to my illusions about myself. And my illusions probably aren't that different from yours. You know what they are: that I can do it all on my own; that I have it all together; that I can be the perfect father, husband, bishop, friend, and on and on. That I can be young and beautiful and healthy for ever. That if only I acquire enough things, I'll be safe. That I can neurotically keep everyone happy and knock the socks off of every single solitary member of this parish. And of course, If I'm going to live, really live, I have to let all that die. Put it on the cross Jesus talks about and let it go.

I have to let it die. So that I can be raised.

That's why we're here. That's the whole purpose for all the activities of this transitional time in this parish. It's the reason for these walls and this altar. That's the only justification for budgets and pledges and programs and rectors. That this might be a place where that strange mix of joy and pain, hope and despair called life can be brought and shared with fierce honesty. Where we can learn to let go of our lives together, let go our illusions about life, knowing that it will be costly and even painful. But standing together week by week in the faith of the friends of Jesus: that if we die with Christ, we will surely be raised with him. Blessed be the God who gives us this life. And blessed be God who calls us to life that is unimaginably new.