

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Slakey
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Sacramento, California

I'm going to be talking today about Truth with a capitol T, about Darkness and Light. In today's Gospel we have a picture of a man who holds fast to his truth, though he is challenged on all sides. One chapter before this in John, Jesus says "You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free." How do we find that truth? And, on the flip side, how and when do we turn away from truth, imprisoning ourselves?

I need to make two introductions before I get to Truth with a capitol T. In today's story, it's possible we see the lived experience of early followers of Jesus. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus warns they will be separated from their families, taken before rulers for questioning, and thrown out of synagogues. All of that happens to the man today. These are many experiences compressed into one story. Some of us have had similar experiences. We had to find our truth somewhere other than the religion of our childhood. Or, we had to work to own the truth of our sexuality and were judged and separated in the process. This is a story many of us know.

Also, when it comes to examining the flip side, how we turn away from truth, it's important not to universalize this story. The Pharisees are not today's Jews. That kind of stereotyping has led to violence in the past, and in the present, as recently as this week. We heard on the news that a man drove his truck into a large Reformed Synagogue and school, and then killed himself. Later I learned he was from Lebanon, and two brothers and a niece were killed in an attack on his village. The Israeli army treated his village as though they were all Hezbollah terrorists, and then he treated this synagogue as though they were all the Israeli army. None of that was true. On our way to truth, we must see past stereotypes.

The story begins with a stereotype. The Disciples ask Jesus "Who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus replies "Nobody sinned", and he heals the man by making a paste of mud,

applying it to his eyes, and telling him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. The man decides to trust Jesus, and makes his way, still blind, with the mud drying on his eyes, to the pool. When he washes, his sight is restored, and he walks back to the village, full of wonder at everything he sees.

Then the trouble begins. Instead of being glad he is healed, people ask if it's really him, and question how it happened. When they hear it was Jesus, they bring the man to the Pharisees. The Pharisees know that the healing took place on a Sabbath, so they argue about whether it can really be from God. But the man tells his tale, holds to his truth, and calls Jesus a prophet. Then, the Pharisees bring in the man's parents, who confirm that he was born blind. But they refuse to support their son, and leave him to tell his own tale to the Pharisees. Once again, the Pharisees try to get the man to deny that Jesus healed him. Again, the man holds to his truth "One thing I know, I was blind, now I see." They question the man again about just what happened. Realizing that nothing will convince them, the man refuses to tell his tale a second time. The Pharisees ask him if he is Jesus' disciple, and proclaim that they are disciples of Moses. They know Moses spoke with God, but know nothing of Jesus. Then the man declares again that it is Jesus who healed him and says "If he were not from God, he could do nothing." At that point, the Pharisees repeat the stereotype Jesus has rejected. "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And then, echoing the experience of many of Jesus' early followers, they cast him out of the synagogue and out of the community.

What's striking about this story to me is that the man must stand on his own for most of it. He has to walk to the pool of Siloam by himself, and then, after the wonder of being able to see, he must stand alone and hold to his truth as others attempt to deny the reality of his experiences. Only after he is cast out does Jesus come to him again. Then the truth of his experience is confirmed, and he knows and feels the presence of Jesus. We can know the truth, and the truth can set us free, but there may be a long road we have to walk alone.

I also want to look at the flip side of the story, because it also can happen to any of us. What can prevent us from seeing the truth, to the point that reality cannot get through, and we are walking in darkness even though we think we see the light?

In this story, what sets the Pharisees on the path to darkness is that they cannot accept the idea that healing on the Sabbath could be from God. After all, God commanded rest on the Sabbath, no work, even healing, should be done on the Sabbath. This specific problem shows up in the Synoptics as well, where Jesus argues that healing and restoration is God's work. John suggests that Jesus continues the work of creation. He has Jesus make a paste of mud, just as God created Adam out of mud in Genesis.

Initially, some of the Pharisees argue that the healing must be from God, but by the end of the story they all are fixed on the rule. Jesus disobeyed the rule, he must be a sinner. In a way, this attachment to a rule is explained by a Pharisaic concept called "building a fence around Torah." The idea is that keeping smaller rules, not going beyond the fence, helps you keep larger rules, like the commandments. Not working on the Sabbath at all in any way helps you keep the larger commandment, to honor the Sabbath.

I want to be clear that I am not saying, and I don't think Jesus is saying, that religious rules like this are bad. In fact, when I looked for modern examples of building a fence around Torah, they made all kinds of sense to me. Say you decide not to use your phone on the Sabbath, to take a day off from texting, games, news, etc. You should put the phone in a drawer, not in your pocket. If its in your pocket, you are constantly distracted and tempted by it. If its in a drawer, its easier to go about your business. The small rule makes the large rule easy to keep.

The problem lies elsewhere, and I think it lies in social control. By being healed, the man has stepped out of his place. Nobody, not even his parents, knows what to do with it. Nobody can acknowledge the good thing that has happened to this man. Instead, the Pharisees feel that their role as arbiters of the community is being challenged. They would rather keep their control than acknowledge the good that has

been done. And so they uphold their rule even in the face of contrary evidence. At the end of today's Gospel, some of the Pharisees say "Are we also blind?" Jesus replies "If you were blind, you would have no guilt, but now that you say We See, your guilt remains."

If God has touched our eyes, our ears, or our hearts, we can only be grateful. It is so easy to prefer other things to the truth, and we are all prone to it. It takes openness to the Holy Spirit to see the healing hand of God at work in the world. Though it is not always an easy road to walk, or an easy thing to see, with God's help, we shall know the truth, and the truth will set us free.