

Ash Wednesday A
Peace, Seattle
March 1, 2017
Joel 2:12-17, Ps 51,
2 Cor 5:20-6:10, Matt 6:1-6, 16-21

TELLING THE TRUTH

Its proper name is sodium pentothal but we're more likely to know it by its nickname—**truth serum**; a standard plot vehicle in detective novels and spy films for decades.¹

You know the scene:

- A protagonist is apprehended but refuses to talk. His captors try everything, but to no avail.
- Then the slightly crazed doctor enters the scene and injects the suspect with truth serum.
- Under the influence of the drug, the subject is unable to resist his questioners any longer, and out spill the beans—for good or for ill.

Sodium pentothal had its beginnings in the early 20th century when an obstetrician named Robert House noticed that a related drug he used as an anesthetic for women giving birth would put them into a state where they would deliver information in a way that seemed automatic. He began to wonder what other applications these kinds of drugs might have.

Ironically, the application that first came to his mind was NOT using the drug in order to leverage confessions from people; but using the drug to help corroborate people's claims of innocence. Needless to say, that application never quite caught on.

Truth seems to be in short supply these days—at least the kind of truth that we all (or at least a healthy majority of us) **can agree on. Everything, it seems, is up for grabs.**

If it feels like your point of view isn't getting enough love—all you have to do is find the right Facebook group, chat room, or online news source, and you're home free.

- The data doesn't support your perspective? No worries...crunch your own data.
- The science doesn't backup your policy initiatives? No problem...enlist some "alternative facts."
- Don't like the message? Blame the messenger.

If truth is a rudder, then we're in trouble.

This Ash Wednesday service is an antidote to all that; a no-holds-barred articulation of human origin and destiny in one sleek sentence:

REMEMBER YOU ARE DUST, AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN.

Our texts tonight tell the truth about the way things are with us, and it doesn't look too good.

The prophet Joel calls a fast. King David, in the psalm, confesses both the height of human arrogance and brokenness and the depth of God's mercy and forgiveness.

Paul situates the promise of reconciliation not in the distant future but in the palpable present: NOW is the acceptable time; NOW is the day of salvation!

And Jesus? Jesus reminds us that, truth serum or not, the One who fashioned us from the humus is fully capable of seeing through our sanctimonious charades.

¹ See Brendan Borrell's article, *What is Truth Serum?* 12/4/2008 edition of *Scientific American*: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-is-truth-serum/> Cited in <http://io9.gizmodo.com/5902559/what-truths-does-truth-serum-actually-reveal>

Truth is at the heart of these texts and at the heart of this service, and it's a hard truth, as harsh as the truth that one day, everyone of us will take our last breath, as our sister June did on Monday, and will return to the Earth from whence we came.

Jesus uses the term “HYPOCRITE” in what he says tonight. Let's unpack that word for a moment.

Hypocrite has its origins in the Greek theater where a hypocrite was a player who wore a mask for their onstage role, imitating the speech, mannerisms, and conduct of the one they portrayed.

When Jesus says HYPOCRITE, he's talking about someone who, in donning a mask, has exchanged their authentic self for a fabricated, a pretend self; someone whose life is acted out to fool others.

Hypocrisy is about the disconnect between the moral values we espouse when the mask is on, and those that we actually practice when the mask is off.

Preacher and teacher William Willimon once began a sermon this way:

If your marriage is happy, if you have no addictions, if your children are obedient and respectful, if you can say all of the words of the creed by heart, and have no major problems believing the Bible [and putting it into practice] then you can leave now. This service is not for you.²

“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return” is a hard truth; but it's a good truth, because it disabuses us from any notion that we can get our act together if we only try harder.

For too often the Christian faith is presented to the world as if it was intended for the winners; for those who are successful at life and belief. For non-hypocrites. But of course, when you read the Scriptures you discover that nothing could be further from the truth.

The season of Lent is a paradox, for in this season we intentionally examine on the one hand the limits of our abilities to do what God asks us to do, the weakness of our wills.

And on the other hand, the depth of Christ's claim upon us in baptism and the boundless ability of the Holy Spirit to amend and transform our lives.

The Lenten discipline of letting go—of a habit, a vice, a craving—or some other element of our living that we would be better off without—coupled with the discipline of embracing a new habit, word, practice, or gesture that will deepen our journey toward wholeness—these are outward expressions of the Lenten paradox.

Letting go...embracing. Turning from...turning toward. We need both partners for the dance. And God uses both to guide us on the journey and to deepen our trust in him.

It won't be long before the ashes we receive tonight are brushed aside, before our foreheads are washed clean. Old habits, being what they are, will lull us again into the sleep that dreams of ourselves at the center of our life and our universe.

But the cross remains, marking us invisibly and indelibly. Amen.

² William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vo. 29:4, 2001, p. 18