

Sermon: Truth and Lies

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I don't know about you, but the last year has been the most peculiar year of my life. And in case you think that the word "peculiar" isn't strong enough, I'd say that the words confusing, scary, depressing, lonely, and tense also apply.

We are more than one year into a worldwide pandemic that has resulted in lockdowns, unemployment, business failures, sickness and the deaths of more than 400,000 Americans — not to mention another 1.6 million worldwide.

We have also passed through a time where too many in positions of power and trust have lied to American citizens. These untruths ranged from small seemingly unnecessary falsehoods to lies that ultimately contributed to the riot at the Capitol that threatened the lives of our elected representatives and our democracy itself.

What is even more disturbing than the lies, is that so many believed them. The Bible tells us to seek the truth, but doing so is not always easy. We know that it is human nature to believe statements that match what we already think to be true. At a Zoom gathering with friends a couple of weeks ago, someone said they had read an article on recent Gallop poll that found that Donald Trump was the most admired man in the U.S. A couple of people on the call immediately reacted with shouts of "Fake News." To be honest, that was my initial reaction as well.

A quick visit to the Gallop website proved that the story was indeed accurate. Though, I should note that the poll was taken before the

insurrection at the Capitol. The specifics of the story are important as well. He achieved that ranking with a total of 18% of the vote and this particular poll nearly ALWAYS finds the sitting president to be the most admired person in America. So it's important for each of us to guard against our own propensity to believe the things that we WANT to be true.

The Bible also tells us to SPEAK the truth. I think that many of those who repeated and amplified the lies, particularly about the results of the election, didn't actually believe them. The desire for attention, or power, or financial gain drove far too many people, including people in positions of power, to spread information that they knew, or at least suspected, was not true.

A senior Republican interviewed by The Washington Post shortly after the election said, "What's the downside for humoring (president Trump) for this little bit of time? No one seriously thinks the results will change." In response, Ezra Kline of the New York Times wrote, "What happened on Wednesday (January 6th) in Washington is the downside. Millions of Americans will take you literally. They will not know you are 'humoring' the most powerful man in the world. They will feel betrayed and desperate. Some of them will be armed."

As the angry mob stormed the Capitol on that day, the entire country learned what can result from lies spoken and spread by those in a position of trust. Early the following morning congress reconvened and officially certified the election of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as president and vice president. At 3:30 am, as the congress finished its business, the Senate chaplain, Barry Black, said to the assembly "These tragedies have reminded us that words matter . . . and that the power of life and death is in the tongue."

So that's where we are, but how do we move forward? I am very encouraged by the tone set by our new president. However, there are still those who wish to undo the results of the election — either because they have been convinced that the election was unfair by self-serving politicians or because it serves to shore up their long-held opposition to diversity, fairness and equality. But I do think that there are signs of hope.

Some of the religious leaders who for too long supported the former president have come out and condemned his statements which contributed to the assault on the Capitol — some even apologizing for their past support. I am also pleased that mainstream Christians are taking a stand. I just read that an online webinar called “Democracy and Faith Under Siege: Responding to Christian Nationalism” is scheduled for this Wednesday. The slate of speakers includes the Most Reverend Michael Curry, presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and Reverend Elizabeth Eaton, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Corporate entities have joined the fight against lies as well. Twitter and Facebook have been working much harder to remove content that spreads falsehoods and advocates violence. Some tech companies that provide infrastructure for online sales have severed ties with firms that supported the unfounded claims of a rigged election.

And, on a lighter, but also encouraging note, one of the Beazley Designs of the Year awards (considered the Oscars of the design world) was given to an art installation called “Teeter Totter Wall.” The project was designed by architects Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello, along with the Mexico-based art collective Colectivo Chopeke. It consists of hot pink seesaws that extend through the slats of the wall on our southern border and allow the children of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad, Mexico to play “together” despite being in separate countries.

So, what is the Christian response in this place and time. Of course, as Christians we believe in justice and we need to continue to hold those who attacked the very seat of our democracy accountable for their actions. And we should insist that those who have continued to sow doubt about the election now publicly declare that Joe Biden is our duly elected 46th president.

We need to keep the pressure on Facebook, Twitter and other social media companies to do a much better job of moderating the content on their platforms.

I also believe that we need to support poetry, theater, music and other forms of art (like the Teeter Totter Wall and the work of inauguration poet, Amanda Gorman) which can be powerful forces to advance our better impulses.

We need to encourage policies from the new administration that promote justice, fairness and equality. But we also need to stay vigilant and call out the new administration if they mislead or if their proposals fail to consider “the least of these.” Joe Biden himself said in his inaugural address: “. . . each of us has a duty and responsibility, as citizens, as Americans, and especially as leaders . . . to defend the truth and defeat the lies.”

And, this is definitely the most difficult one, each of us must work at healing the relationships with those in our lives with whom we disagree. As Christians, we are called to compassion and reconciliation. I’ll grant you, there are some we will not be able to reach, but others will be open if we approach with gentleness and a willingness to listen. I think that many of those we feel are on the “other side” are hurting. They feel misunderstood. If we begin by sharing our mutual humanity, there is hope.

I know that sounds far too simple. But I want to read you some excerpts from an episode of the NPR show “Here and Now”:

Stanford researchers put 526 Americans at a resort in Texas for a weekend in September of 2019. The social research organization NORC (the National Opinion Research Center) at the University of Chicago found just the right mix of diverse opinions, and Stanford’s researchers dug in as they had conversations about everything from immigration to health care.

Researcher Larry Diamond, says the single most important takeaway from their study was after three and a half days of talking about political issues — not about politicians or candidates — the percentage of people who thought American democracy was doing “reasonably well” doubled.

Diamond says they saw many Republicans edge away from their “hostile” positions on immigration, and Democrats tended to back away from staunch positions on topics such as taxation or the universal \$15 minimum wage.

They proved their theory: People on opposite sides of the aisle found themselves gravitating toward the center after discussing the issues in groups of differing opinions, hearing first-hand stories and listening to experts. “I think it wasn't just coming face to face,” Diamond says. “I think it was the magic of deliberation under good conditions, which don't generally prevail in our country today.”

We need to support these kinds of efforts — to sow the seeds of understanding wherever and whenever we can. We need to be honest, with ourselves and with each other. And we need to try to reach out to those with whom we don’t agree and try to find common ground.

As it says in Galatians 6:9-10, “So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

With God’s help, we CAN move into a more positive and hopeful future. Amen.

Benediction

Phillipians 4

8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.