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8AM ET
JOHN 8:31-38

THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE

A SERMON BY
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Date: February 18, 2024
Preacher: Rev. Dr. Howard-John Wesley
Sermon Title: The Truth Shall Set You Free
Scripture: John 8: 31-38 (New International Version)

³¹ To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” ³³ They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” ³⁴ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are Abraham’s descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word. ³⁸ I am telling you what I have seen in the Father’s presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father.

SERMON SUMMARY

Using the iconic television show, “To Tell the Truth”, Pastor Howard-John Wesley teaches us that there are times in life when people benefit from the propagation of lies. The imposters on this television show benefit from convincing others that a lie is the truth, and so did the Pharisees of Jesus’ time.

During 160-140 BC, the religious sect of the Pharisees became powerful. As Israel was slipping into synchronicity with the Assyrians, the Pharisees focused on rules, rituals and proper participation in the Jewish religion, all measured by strict adherence to purity, as defined by the laws of Moses.

Jesus abrogated all the rules of the Pharisees by dining with prostitutes, healing on the wrong day of the week, and allowing his disciples to eat without the ceremonial washing of hands. Because of this, Jesus and the Pharisees were always at odds. And what-is-more, because the multitudes were attracted to Jesus and because he challenged the privilege and position of power held by the Pharisees, they plotted to kill him.

Comparing the Pharisees to modern day folk with pharisaical tendencies, Pastor Wesly reminds us that people will propagate a lie to maintain their positions of power. Lies are always in opposition to God's way. The people of God must always tell the truth.

Enter again the Pharisees. In today's text, we learn the Pharisees did not tell the truth of their history of being enslaved. Their lies about their past denied them:

- The wisdom they would have gained if they had only told the truth.
- The opportunity to see the ability of God to use their past as a womb of faith to birth a new and powerful life of hope.
- The ability to live fully free of their past.
- The chance to see the possibilities for the next chapter of their lives.

As men and women of God, we must always tell the truth. We must not be lulled or drawn into lies by prosperity, false narratives, fear, or by becoming drunk with the wine of the world. We must tell the truth of our history, our lives, our mistakes, and our hoped-for future, so that we can:

- Be free in God.
- Go forward and not backward.
- Realize the true cost our elders and ancestors paid for us, their lives and their trials.
- See our past as soil for our seeds of faith and our future as the harvest of abundant hope.

- Understand that out of the darkness of our past comes the bright light of our future.
- Appreciate our encounters with God in the difficult past and trust God with our future.
- Raise a generation that knows the rich history that is their foundation and legacy.

May we each know the truth of our past. May we honor it by telling it as we shape a new and bright future.

KEY POINTS

1. The 1950's television show, "To Tell the Truth" modeled that there are those who profit in their ability to convince others of a lie.
2. There is a deeper danger in *living* a lie than there is in being *entertained* by a lie. The television show, "To Tell the Truth" entertained with lies. But to live a lie is a damnable thing.
3. The Pharisees believed in a hierarchy of sins, with some sins being worse than others. They focused on sins that broke dietary rules, rules concerning circumcision, and rules associated with sabbath keeping.
4. Never underestimate the power to which privilege will go to maintain its position and to protect itself.
5. When your enemies cannot handle the truth you tell, they will demonize you so they can diminish and destroy you.
6. When you do not tell the truth about the past, you cannot live authentically in the future. You are trapped by the lies of the past.
7. Those that live within a lie do not want you to bring up the truth. They sometimes invite you to stop bringing up old things because they do not recognize their complicity or want to own their role.
8. In the text there were those who were not card-carrying Pharisees, but who acted like Pharisees, even though they should have known better, because they believed in Jesus. We can look and act like Pharisees, even though we know Jesus. We must be careful of our pharisaical tendencies.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU:

1. Take a look at the verses of *Lift Every Voice and Sing* and select one line that means a great deal to you. Be prepared to share your thoughts with your Village.
2. Which game shows have you appreciated and enjoyed? Select one that you believe teaches a life lesson and share the lesson you derived from this show?

INTO THE BIBLE QUESTIONS:

1. We learn in this sermon that the Pharisees believed there was a hierarchy of sins, and some sins were worse than others. What do you think about this? Are all sins equal in God's eyes? Consider this question in light of James 2:10, which says, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."
2. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, chapters 5, 6, and 7) Jesus delivers valuable lessons and truths on how He wants us to live and who He wants us to be. Beyond the Beatitudes are words that challenge us to examine and improve our community and private lives. During your devotional time this week, use these scriptures as a mirror to examine yourself and the truth of who you are and who God wants you to become.

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS:

1. Pastor Wesley referred to Deuteronomy 26 which says, "when you enter the place of promise...sit down with your children and tell them the truth." Name a book, play, museum exhibit, or movie about Black history that should be shared with today's youth. What can our youth learn from it?
2. This week's sermon included several examples of public figures that have been publicly maligned for challenging institutions: including Rev. Dr. Eboni Marshall-Turman, Colin Kaepernick, Rev. Dr. Yvette Flunder and Rev. Dr. Gina Stewart. Can you recall a time in your life when you were maligned, how did it impact you and how did you respond?
3. Pastor Wesley said, "You can't properly diagnose what is wrong today without telling the truth of what happened yesterday." He notes he had to give a medical history on his first visit to his new physician. Describe how ignoring, forgetting, suppressing or denying some hidden truths within our family's medical history (like diabetes, depression, addiction, cancer) could cause us to miss what God has planned in the next chapter for our family.
4. The example of the revisionist history/storytelling of the Israelites' bondage in Egypt bears an eerie/uncanny resemblance to the present-day efforts to deny the enslavement of Africans in the United States. How has your present condition been shaped by your past history – your true history?
5. Pastor Wesley ends the sermon by demanding that we not be made drunk on the wine of the world. He enjoins us to "stop drinking". Have you ever been seduced by the "wine of the world?" How did you come out of that stupor? How do you avoid going back?

“CAN I PUSH IT?” QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you believe it's so easy for conservative churches and politicians to dismiss systematic racism and oppression toward black and brown people? What do you envision America to look like when privilege decides to tell the truth?
2. It is a pharisaical practice to rename our past and participate in revisionist history. During Black History Month, we emphasize the resurrection of those voices that have been lost and strive to safeguard the truth of our history for today and for future generations. How can we ensure that our history is truthfully told? What role does the church have in telling the true history?
3. In the harsh reality of our world, we often struggle to make sense of injustice. How does the Bible help us reconcile the ongoing pharisaical behavior outlined in the successful prosecution of Donald Trump by Attorney General Letitia James and the pending prosecution of Donald Trump by District Attorney Fani Willis? Is there a biblical story that gives you hope when your faith in our society wanes?

FOR INDIVIDUAL OR VILLAGE STUDY

ACTIVITY/SPIRIT WORK:

Pastor lists several instances of lies winning in the world. Select a lie that has lived in our contemporary culture that disturbs you. In your devotional time this week, write a prayer to God that seeks a solution. Also, schedule in your planner one or two things that you **will** do in your individual sphere of influence to help correct this lie.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS:

1. Pastor Wesley tells the story of his doctor investigating the health concerns of his father, grandfather, and uncles. Look back on your life. Identify something that once inhibited your people from living fully into the plan of God for their lives, but once the truth was told a new type of freedom emerged. Your memories might include things such as unhealthy habits, reoccurring generational sin, or lies that were told that limited the ability to move forward. While you need not identify the details, describe what happened once the truth was told. How did the truth transform your life?
2. The Pharisees of Jesus' day were concerned with sabbath, circumcision, and dietary laws. These boundary line issues, in their minds, kept the people of God “pure” and made them

distinct from other peoples. Pastor Wesley suggested some contemporary issues modern day religious leaders might seize upon as important for keeping God's people pure and distinct. Review your notes and lift some of these issues. Do you agree or disagree with them as important for God's people? How do we avoid becoming modern day Pharisees?

3. Pastor Wesley says, "That's real life – there are those who prefer to tell lies and there are those who are searching for the truth." What motivated the Pharisees to lie about the Jews' history as slaves? What gets in the way of some conservative Americans telling the uncomfortable truth about slavery in America?
4. History teaches us that privilege will protect itself. Can you recall a time when you witnessed power rising up to guard its territory? What was the result? Have you ever attempted to protect your privilege at the expense of others? What did you learn from this experience?
5. In contemporary culture, we have forgotten important aspects of our history. What is the cost of this amnesia and what is a remedy?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. The effects of the slavery on African Americans today:
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8352535/>
2. The Book of John Video from Bible Project:
Gospel of John Summary: A Complete Animated Overview (Part 1)
3. History of the Black National Anthem, 'Lift Every Voice and Sing':
<https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/lift-every-voice-and-sing>
4. For more information on Johnny Robinson, please see the link below.
<https://www.npr.org/2010/09/15/129856740/johnnys-death-the-untold-tragedy-in-birmingham>
5. Rev Dr. Gina Stewart, first woman to preach at The National Baptist Convention:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XApzUZXNriY>