

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem” / Luke 13:31-35 / 24 February 2013

Have you ever told someone a hard truth? Have you ever held a mirror up to someone’s face...and gotten kicked in the teeth for it? Or—perhaps more to the point—have you ever kicked someone for holding a mirror up to your face? Anyone who tells the hard truths will pay for it dearly. There are easy truths that also need telling, and so most of us just stick with those. And yet, today is the day when you and I are called to tell—and to hear—hard truths.

I recently took communion to a group of shut-ins, and we sat for about forty-five minutes talking. All these folks were about 90 years old, so the conversation turned to aging. One of them said, “It’s just so hard to get old. I know people have been doing it for a long time, but I don’t know how.” I asked them, “When you see yourself in your mind’s eye, what age are you?” Plato (or maybe Socrates) believed that, in the afterlife, everyone will be 30 years old. I have to admit that, most days, I still think I’m 29 or 30. All three of them agreed that they often see themselves much younger than they really are. In fact, many people speak about the afflictions of old age as if they’re somehow temporary, as if they’ll get back to being thirty again, just as soon as they can get past using this walker, or get a hip replacement, or get over the endless pain in their legs. We see ourselves in certain ways, and at times our information is outdated or inaccurate.

David Eagleman, a brilliant, well-known neuroscientist at Baylor, wrote a book called *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. It’s just forty imaginative little scenarios of what the afterlife might look like. His sixteenth tale from the afterlives is called “Mirrors.” I’ll read bits of it to you and summarize the rest:

When you think you’ve died, you haven’t actually died. Death is a two-stage process, and where you wake up after your last breath is something of a Purgatory: you don’t feel dead, you don’t look dead, and in fact you are not dead. Yet.

Eagleman goes on to say that, in this afterlife, you’re stripped of everything but raw consciousness. Your memories are gone. Your understanding of yourself is gone. All you have is a vague awareness of being.

And since you always lived inside your own head, you were much better at seeing the truth about others than you ever were at seeing yourself. So you navigated your life with the help of others who held up mirrors for you. People praised your good qualities and criticized your bad habits, and these perspectives—often surprising to you—helped you to guide your life. So poorly did you know yourself that you were always surprised at how you looked in photographs or how you sounded on voice mail.

In this way, much of your existence took place in the eyes, ears...of others. And now that you’ve left the Earth, you are stored in scattered heads around the globe.

*Here in this Purgatory, all the people with whom you’ve ever come in contact are gathered. The scattered bits of you are collected, pooled, and unified. The mirrors are held up in front of you. Without the benefit of filtration, you see yourself clearly for the first time. And that is what finally kills you.**

* David Eagleman. *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. New York: Random House, 2009, 43-44.

It was that Scottish poet, Robert Burns, who said, “Oh, would some power the small gift give us, to see ourselves as others see us, it would from many a blunder free us, and foolish notion.” Who are you really? You are your words. You are your behaviors. Would you be surprised if someone, in love, held a clear and true mirror up to your face to see yourself finally and fully as you are? Any dictator might surround himself with yes-men and sycophants. It’s easy to love a flatterer. And yet, each one of us can look back over our years to find a person who told us in love something we didn’t want to hear. And as much as it upset us, it changed the trajectory of our living. You might want to crucify the person who holds a mirror up to your face. It’s crazy how we put to death the ones we need the most! But those who live in love will sometimes be called upon to speak a hard truth...in love.

Such is the case for Jesus of Nazareth, the hard-hitting preacher who has been wandering around Galilee, calling people of faith back to the very best teachings of their Torah—the love of neighbor, the forgiveness of enemies, the pursuit of real justice for the downtrodden. But like all speakers of hard truths, he ends up getting himself in trouble with those powerful few who have a lot invested in the easy truths. And so, some friendly Pharisees warn Jesus that King Herod is mad and wants to kill him—like he killed John the Baptist. Jesus responds by saying, basically, “Go and tell that skunk not to bother. I’m out of here in three days. And if he wants me dead, then he can rest easy, because I’m on my way to Jerusalem, and they will surely kill me there!” And that’s when Jesus launches into that haunting lament over the fate of the holy city. He says, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets, and stone the ones who are sent to warn you! Many a time I’ve wanted to gather you under my wings, the way a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you wouldn’t let me!”

You know, everyone likes an easy truth, myself included. As a minister, I love the baptisms, when I get to cradle a baby in my arms and speak words of blessing and promise into that child’s new life. I like those baptismal words of unending love. If I’m honest, too, every baptism reminds me of a day not too long ago when the child in my arms was my own...and how quickly the years are fleeting. Baptism reminds me of how faithfully you—the people of Christ’s church—are keeping your promises to nurture and guide these children, including my own. Yes, baptism gives me an easy truth to love. But then old Ash Wednesday rolls around with its hard truth, that each person born into this world will die. C’mon, don’t ask me to put ashes on people’s faces; I’m the guy who gets weepy at baptisms! Don’t ask me to tell them the hard truth that they already know, that in this world, there is no way out but through, that all of us will die eventually. I don’t want to tell that truth. In my more honest moments, I’ll admit that I don’t even like to believe that truth. And yet, it must be told, and I must tell it.

An easy truth is, “You’re always beautiful to me.” A hard truth is, “You’re always beautiful to me, but it’s time to give that dress to the Goodwill.” An easy truth is, “I love you.” A hard truth is, “I love you, but if you keep it up, you’re headed for trouble.” An easy truth is, “God loves you.” The hard truth is, “God loves you, but God may not spare you from suffering.” An easy truth is, “God is in control.” The hard truth is, “God is in control, but God’s methods usually involve resurrection rather than rescue.” Easy truths are brief, memorable soundbites of truth; they’re snappy, and simple, and they make us feel good. The problem with easy truths is that they’re usually only part of the picture. The fullest truths are at once simple and complex. They take years to hear

because they come replete with nuances, and intricacies, and they can never be uttered in a single breath. The fullest truths take years to tell, because the only way to tell them is to live them. You can enunciate the words, “I love you,” but the only way to say it for real is to live it, day in, day out, for years. The telling of truths is in the living, and the loving, and the being. The fullest truths become stories—parables—of faithful living, courageous dying, and joyful rising to new ways of life.

According to a Sioux Indian legend, the Creator gathered all of creation and said, “I want to hide something from the humans until they are ready for it. It is the realization that they participate with me in creating the world, day by day.” The eagle said, “Give it to me, I will take it to the moon.” The Creator said, “No, one day they will go there and find it.” The salmon said, “I will bury it on the bottom of the ocean.” “No, they will go there, too.” The buffalo said, “I will bury it on the Great Plains.” The Creator said, “They will cut into the skin of the Earth and find it even there.” Grandmother Mole, who lives in the breast of Mother Earth, and who has no physical eyes but sees with spiritual eyes, said, “Hide the secret inside of them.” The Creator said, “It is done.”

Surely the hardest truths to hear are the ones that are already hidden deep inside of us. We already know them to be true, but we would prefer to deny them. The hardest truths to hear are those things whose truthfulness we know intuitively, deep inside our spirits, and whose truthfulness we would really love to disbelieve. (Things like: You know, dear, we’re going to have to move out of our house. Or: This career is killing me. Or: Maybe it’s time for us to see a marriage counselor.) Jesus accused the powerful of betraying the people they were meant to serve in order to curry favor with the Roman Empire. Herod was a puppet king who profited from the Roman oppression of Israel. The religious elite in Jerusalem were collaborators with unjust systems of taxation and domination. Of course they hated Jesus for naming the elephant in the room. You will never hate anyone more than the person whose accusations echo the cries of your conscience! This is why Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated; those who hated him knew in their most secret hearts that he was right! They could not bear the mirror that he held up to their faces. The powerful had killed Amos, and Zechariah, and Micah for the same reason: they knew these prophets were right. They held up a mirror.

When Jesus spoke his hard truths to the powerful of his day, when he told them that they had shirked their ancient commitment to care for the poor, to deal kindly with the widow and the orphan, to resist the allure of power and to walk humbly with their God, they knew in their most secret hearts that he was right, and they hated him for it. In a way, their desire to kill Jesus was really all bound up with their own self-loathing. They felt guilty about shirking their responsibility to the people under their charge. They couldn’t bear to hear his message because their own consciences had taunted them with the very same accusations. “We’re sellouts. We’ve been entrusted with the well-being of the people, and we have betrayed them.”

And yet, for what it’s worth, Jesus speaks his hard truths...in love. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem!” You know, whenever someone says your name twice like that, they’re about to tell you something you don’t want to hear, something said out of love. In fact, the only other place in Scripture where Jesus speaks like this—using a proper name twice—is when he says, “Martha, Martha! You worry about so many things! Martha, Martha! I love you, but you’re driving me crazy. You’re such a worrywart that it’s really starting to wear on me. I came to visit with you, Martha, to be together. I did not come so that you

could impress me with your skills as a hostess. There is only one thing needful.” And then, strangely, Jesus never gets around to telling Martha what that one needful thing is. I think it’s because some truths are too hard to tell. Words cannot convey them, but only actions, and years of faithfulness, years of kindness, years of living out that truth, which is too hard to tell. It can only be expressed in the all the daily stuff of living.

Occasionally still, as I’m walking past a shop window with a reflection, or a large mirror at a shopping mall or some such place, I’ll glance at the-guy-who-is-my-reflection, and my first thought is, “Grandpa!” I look much more like my mother’s father than I ever intended. With the baldhead, and my floppy gray hat, and the long black coat, and the big black glasses that were fashionable in his day and once again in mine. I never set out to dress like my grandfather, much less resemble him. When I imagine myself, in my mind’s eye, I look nothing like him. And yet a surprise glance at my own reflection tells me otherwise. It’s just so hard to see ourselves such as we are, so hard to know what others see when they look at us. We live with illusions about ourselves, some of them harmless, some of them even healthy, but others quite unhealthy. And, oh those people who hold mirrors up to our faces! We might resent them, we might want to crucify them at first, but then we spend the rest of our lives grateful for them.

There are hard truths that need to be told...and heard, at this point in history, at this time in the life of our world, and truly, at this juncture in your private life. There are hard truths that will get their tellers into trouble because our society knows deep in its guilty heart what is true, and it does not always want to believe. Deep in our hearts, we know that today’s lifestyles—with their wastefulness and self-indulgence—will cost the people of tomorrow dearly. Deep in our hearts, we know that our wealth and privilege can only exist because someone on the other side of the globe—or the other side of the Rio Grande—someone in crushing poverty is willing to sell himself or herself for very cheap. Deep in our hearts, we all know that we are mired in those big cycles and systems of injustice, that America in all her great glory has for the past thirty years been slipping from democracy toward plutocracy—where wealth puts new Herods in power, Herods who continue to plunder their own people for the sake of selfish gain, just as they were doing in Jesus’ day. More than any of that, you and I know—we know!—what it is in our own lives that absolutely must change. We don’t want to know, but we do.

The most difficult thing to accept about the hard truths is the fact that, deep inside our spirits, we know very well that they’re true. And we don’t want them to be true. And that’s why we could very well crucify the people who care enough to tell those truths. They deny us our illusions. They force us to accept what is. Lent is a season for facing hard truths, and those hard truths are already there inside of us, clamoring to be recognized and set free. Each day, I drive past that sign on a Lutheran church that reads, “The truth will make you free.” It will. The truth will indeed make you free. What truth is it time for you to hear? What truth is it time to tell? Amen.