

“THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE.”

This weekend we are celebrating the birth of our nation. It is not unusual for this celebration to spill over into faith communities; especially Christian communities. Yet, I must share with you that I face many internal struggles when attempting to mesh patriotic celebrations with religion. I believe there is a naturally healthy tension between religion and country; and therefore, when you try to combine them you come out with a mess.

I am an American. I am also a person of faith who self identifies as a Christian. The ideals of my faith and the ideals of my country do not always agree. From years of experience I know that I can stand before a congregation and challenge and even criticize aspects of religion and faith in order to produce thinking and spiritual growth, and then that the congregation will often respond with applause and amen's; but, my experience also tells me that I cannot do the same in regards to my country; for then my patriotism is questioned. It is my experience that people are more sensitive about their country than they are about their religion. Therefore, I am choosing to focus today on what I believe truly makes us free; and it is not a constitution, or war, or flag waving—it is the truth!

Read John 8:31-33

When John is writing his gospel there is a conflict among believers. Can you imagine such a thing; people of faith being in conflict? In John's day the conflict is between Jews and Jewish Christians. The conflict is summarized with this question: Who can lay claim to God's promises and who can claim the status of being God's people? Again I ask; can you imagine such a dispute among people of faith?

Jesus initial followers all came from the Jewish faith. For years his followers continued practicing the Jewish faith along side their belief in Jesus. The Jewish Christians were quite comfortable with this arrangement and even continued to attend temple. But after some time the Jewish religious leaders insisted that those following Jesus teachings were no longer 'real' Jews. Hence, they were no longer welcomed in the Temple or synagogues.

John writes his gospel in the midst of this faith conflict where two groups of believers feel superior to each other. Since one group, the traditional Jews, have more people and power than the other group, the Jewish Christians, they are able to determine policies and rules as to who can stay and who must go. In John's gospel, and particularly in the eighth

chapter, his apparent antagonism is not towards Judaism but rather towards the Jewish power structure and political forces that have attempted to cut his community off from their faith tradition and customs. Essentially, the language in chapter eight is of the minority group, represented by John, speaking in protest to the majority. It is in the midst of this faith battle, when people in the minority are asked to leave their place of worship because they have embraced something outside of the traditional that enhances their spiritual journey, that John chooses to include Jesus words, *“The truth shall make you free.”*

Now of course none of this sounds familiar today! People of faith fighting over who is closer to God? Insistence on doctrinal purity? People being asked to leave their place of worship because they do not meet certain standards?

*“The truth shall make you free.”* Truth can be defined as non-concealment, genuine, that on which one can rely, sincerity, authenticity, and divine reality. Truth! Truth in the context of John’s gospel is referring to the person and message of Jesus—that Jesus speaks the truth and is the truth. However, I do believe that we can also take Jesus words, *“The truth shall make you free,”* and apply them more generally. For instance, when one tells the truth it keeps one from getting caught up in the web of deceit. Lying leads to cover-up; which is deceit. It is the cover-up, the deceit, that generally gets people into trouble. Clear examples of this are Presidents Nixon and Clinton—due to cover up one had to resign and one was impeached. The truth could have set them free! Would there have been consequences to the truth? Yes! But I do not believe as severe as the consequences of cover-up. When will people ever learn that it is better to deal with the consequences of truth than it is to deal with the consequences of lying? *“The truth shall make you free.”*

Lying can also be associated with denial. I read of a woman who just could not understand why she kept gaining weight. She was convinced that she was not overeating. She would even become angry at those who would suggest that overeating was her main weight problem. Finally, someone suggested that she start keeping a log of everything she would eat. At the end of just the first day of keeping the log she broke down crying when she saw in her own hand writing how much she had eaten. That evening she made a vow to change her eating habits—to change what she had denied was the problem all along. Why? Because she was confronted with the truth. It was the truth that set her free from her food addiction.

Freedom! The freedom that Jesus person and message offers is a freedom from religious law and moralism. By accepting Jesus message one

is freed from the letter of religious law and doctrine in order to embrace the meaning of the message. Let me illustrate what I am saying with a short story.

One Sunday morning an old cowboy entered a church just before services were to begin. Although the old man and his clothes were spotlessly clean, he wore jeans, a denim shirt and boots that were very worn and ragged. In his hand he carried a worn out old hat and an equally worn out bible.

The church he entered was in a very upscale and exclusive part of the city. It was the largest and most beautiful church the old cowboy had ever seen. The people of the congregation were all dressed with expensive clothes and accessories. As the cowboy took a seat, the others moved away from him. No one greeted, spoke to, or welcomed him. They were all appalled at his appearance and did not attempt to hide it.

The preacher gave a long sermon about Hellfire and brimstone and a stern lecture on how much money the church needed to do God's work. As the old cowboy was leaving the church, the preacher approached him and asked the cowboy to do him a favor. "Before you come back in here again, have a talk with God and ask him what He thinks would be appropriate attire for worship."

The old cowboy assured the preacher he would.

The next Sunday, he showed back up for the services wearing the same ragged jeans, shirt, boots, and hat. Once again he was completely shunned and ignored. The preacher approached the man and said, "I thought I asked you to speak to God before you came back to our church." "I did," replied the old cowboy. "If you spoke to God, what did He tell you the proper attire should be for worshipping in here?" asked the preacher.

"Well, sir, God told me that He didn't have a clue what I should wear. He says He's never been in this church before."

Sometimes my friends we get so wrapped up in the letter of the law, in its pretty detail, in the fancy specifics of doctrine, that we lose sight of what faith and the spiritual journey are about. We lose sight of what relationship with God is about. Jesus gives us opportunity to get back on track, and to focus on what is really important, when he says, "*The truth shall make you free.*"

Lying does not lead to freedom—truth does! Denial does not lead to freedom—truth does! Following the letter of religious law does not lead to freedom—truth does! Wars, constitutions, and flag waving do not lead to freedom—truth does! Friends, the message of truth is universal; for countries, for politicians, for corporations, for churches, for individuals.

*“The truth shall make you free.”*