

Remember What's True

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Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free (John 8:31-32).

I was in a funk early last week, and I shared that in our staff Bible study. Our church staff is made up of some very wise and thoughtful people, and they helped pull me out of my funk. Mostly they put things back into perspective, until I realized that my mood was a matter of not seeing clearly. It was Mandi who summed it up. She said, "We have to remember what's true."

That's exactly right. Many of our problems are the result of not seeing the whole truth: the truth about ourselves, the truth about the world, and the truth about God.

When bad things happen, we're naturally sad, of course. That's perfectly normal and appropriate. We need to grieve our losses. If we don't, our wounds never heal. But when depression sets in, we lose something else. We lose perspective. We forget most of what's true. We filter out every good thing and focus on the bad. Our pain is the only thing we see. Nothing else matters.

But that's where we go wrong. In effect, we lie to ourselves. We tell ourselves, "Only this is real – only the thing I focus on." But that's not true. The whole world is still there, even if we close our eyes and can't see it. God is still there, even if we close our hearts and can't feel it.

One reason we need each other is to remind us of what's true. That's why "organized religion" is so much more valuable than the privatized "spirituality" people talk about these days. We're all so egocentric, so driven by our own desires and interests and feelings and fears, that we need each other to put things back into perspective, to remind us that what we see is only a small part of the truth.

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Jesus says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." This morning I want to remind us of some things that are true, and how the truth can free us.

The First Letter of John says, "We are God's children now." That's the first thing we need to remember. We are God's children. Every one of us, you and I – we belong to God. We may think we know that already, but see how much truth is packed into that one statement.

It means the Creator of heaven and earth loves you as his own precious child. That means you are somebody. When people get down, we often feel as though we don't matter. But that's not true. You do matter, all the time. Whether you feel it or not, you matter to your Maker. "See what love the Father has given us," John says, "that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." People think it's a big deal to be the son or daughter of a celebrity, but we are sons and daughters of the Almighty. How much more status do we need? How much more important do we have to be, than to be a beloved child of the Ruler of the universe?

Any believer who feels worthless is forgetting what's true. Now I know that people typically get their self esteem from other people. If another person thinks I'm terrific and tells me so, that builds me up. But human beings are an unreliable source of self worth. They get moody and cranky and don't always tell us what we need to hear. When we're young we get crushes on people who always seem to have a crush on somebody else. People we think are friends let us down sometimes. And even when we're blessed with someone who really does love us, this life comes to an end one day, and then what? Who am I when she's no longer around to tell me that she loves me?

We rely on other people to tell us we're worthwhile, but the deeper truth is this: Who we are fundamentally is a child of God, whose steadfast love endures forever.

Many people's self esteem comes from their job. I am somebody because I'm president of Acme Company, or because I'm a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher or whatever. But if my value derives from my job, what happens when I no longer have that job – when I get laid off, or when I retire? People think, "I was somebody yesterday because of my job, but today I'm nobody." Really? Can that be true for a child of God? Is there nothing else God wants me do in this world

but pine for the position I no longer have? In a world full of need, is there really nothing I can contribute now?

The most remarkable thing people base their self esteem on is money. If I measure my value in money, I can actually count how much I'm worth, down to the dollar, and compare myself with others. People talk that way, don't they? They say, "He's worth a couple million." Or ten million. Or ten thousand. Or nothing. "I have little net worth," someone says. Really? We can measure a person's "net worth" that way? The unit of measure for a human being, made in the image of God, is the dollar? What was the net worth of John Wesley, then, who died with just a horse and a Bible and a spoon in his saddlebag, but revived the Church of England with his Methodist movement? Or Mohandas Gandhi, who died with a few garments of clothing, but gained independence for India? Or Jesus, for that matter, who died with nothing, but saved the whole world? Just to say that money is the measure of a man or a woman is to show how ridiculous the idea is, yet how many people's lives demonstrate that they really do think that way?

We are children of God, which means we are worth infinitely more than earthly measures tell, and our purpose is far greater than we imagine.

We're worth more, not because of our inherent goodness, but because we belong to God. Tammy said last week, in her wonderful sermon on hope and dying, that people are often afraid they won't be good enough to get into heaven. To that, she said, the answer is easy: Of course you're not good enough, but that's beside the point. We're not good enough for heaven, but Jesus is. The purpose of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is to show that what we cannot do on our own –namely, save ourselves and be worthy of heaven – God does for us, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. If we are "in Christ," we become a new creation. The Holy Spirit gives us an extreme makeover, so that, by the time God is finished, we really will belong in heaven.

Anyone who thinks Christianity is about trying to be good enough to deserve heaven still doesn't get it. The good news of the gospel is precisely that we can't earn our way into heaven, but we don't need to. As Bill Coffin used to say, "I'm not okay, and you're not okay, but that's okay," because God loves us, and saves us by grace through Jesus Christ. Here again, the truth sets us free. If we know that salvation depends on God's goodness and not our own, we can be free of guilt for falling short, and free of hypocrisy for pretending to be better than we really are.

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We're worth more than we know because we matter so much to God. When you think about it, that's what worth means, isn't it? Nothing is worth anything all by itself. Things have value only if they're valuable to someone. Gold would be just glitter in the ground if there were no people to value it. And people are like that too. The horrible history of genocide reminds us that when one group of people has no value to another, they can be destroyed with astonishing cruelty. No, what makes human beings valuable is that we matter so much to God. And because our worth comes from God, we are infinitely more valuable than we realize.

But Christianity is not just a case for self esteem. People who come to church just to be built up miss the other half of the truth. The fact that we belong to God gives us both a value and a vocation, a confirmation and a calling. "You are not your own," Paul says, "you were bought with a price." We were made to live for God, and for God's purposes, to share God's reconciling work in the world.

One of the great lies of our culture is that it's all about me: my life is my life, and my stuff is my stuff, and I answer only to myself for the way I live and what I do with what I have. None of that is true. We belong to God, which means we not only matter to God, but we answer to God.

The truth is, we are owners of nothing ultimately, but stewards of everything on behalf of God. The fact that we bring nothing into the world and take nothing out should make that obvious. All we have is the soul shaped by the way we live. This world is a factory for making souls, a place where people become fit for heaven, or not. If that's true – and Jesus says in effect that it is – then we need to live in the light of that truth.

What Jesus saves us from most is ourselves, our self-centeredness. God has no use in heaven for self-centered souls. "When I was hungry, did you feed me? When I was naked, or sick, or a stranger, or in prison, did you care for me?" That's the kind of question Jesus will ask, come judgment day. Did you love God and your neighbor as yourself – not just in words, but in the way you lived and shared the resources God lent you for a while?

The whole point of life is to become like Jesus, someone who loves God and other people with everything he has. Remember what's true. We belong to God. That means we are worth more than we can imagine, but only insofar as we live for God, and care for God's other children. If we do that, we will know the truth, and the truth will make us free.