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Dealing With Truthiness

John 17:8a

Stephen Colbert, host of Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report*, likes to spoof the way politicians and television pundits ignore inconvenient facts. He demonstrates how they brazenly insist that what they feel and want to be true must be recognized as true. To drive home his point Colbert makes use of a term that *The New York Times* recognized in 2005 as one of the words that defines the spirit of our age. The word is truthiness. It represents the idea that what feels true must be accepted as true.

Rodney Clapp has written that it is the allure of truthiness that lies behind the phenomenal success of *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. It is a culture of truthiness that has let Brown get away with ignoring the overwhelming evidence that contradicts his fanciful theories about the origins of Christianity. He spins out an alternative view of Jesus that offers a more comfortable fit with the spirit of our age. Clapp sums up his argument in these words:

Dan Brown's novel has played perfectly into a culture that stays close to the surface, to the cinematic, to the allure of truthiness. However much it consumes our attention at the moment, *The Da Vinci Code* is a sand castle on the beach, one that will soon erode and melt from view, subjected to the waves of information and stimulation that ceaselessly beat the shores of our hypermediated culture. The far more pressing challenge, and the one that will not soon go away, is how the church can faithfully serve its mission of witnessing to enduring truth in a world more and more susceptible to truthiness (*The Christian Century*, May 16, 2006, page 25).

This is the issue that Jesus addressed in the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John. This passage is part of a pastoral prayer which extends through four chapters of the gospel. The portion of the prayer we read today functions as a farewell message to Jesus' disciples. It is a commencement address to disciples who will be taking on new responsibilities after Jesus' death. They will assume responsibility for witnessing to the enduring truth that Jesus has passed on to them. Their new status is described in verse eight when Jesus prays to the Father, 'for the words that you gave me I have given to them (John 17:8a).' The challenge of their new status is what are they to do with these words and the enduring truths they represent. Jesus' commencement address makes one point very clear. The disciples are not to give in to truthiness. If they witness to the enduring truths that Jesus has given them, they cannot evade the inconvenient facts. They will not have the luxury of refashioning their message to conform to the spirit of their age.

For fifteen years Harvey Cox taught a course at Harvard called "Jesus and the Moral Life." Some of his students were Christian but many were not. In the early years of this course Cox ended it with the crucifixion. It seemed to him that the resurrection was a concept that would not be accessible for the non-Christians in the course. In a sense Cox could be said to have been avoiding the resurrection because it was an inconvenient concept in an academic setting. But his students would not put up with this kind of truthiness. They challenged him to deal with the one event in Jesus' life that

set him apart from Moses, Muhammad, or the Buddha. This concern was shared by the non-Christian students, too.

Cox was forced to come to terms with what it would mean to witness to the resurrection in this diverse academic setting. Then he discovered that there was an entry point to the resurrection that all his students could share. When he studied the resurrection passages he noticed that they were not so much about immortality as they were about justice. To restore a crucified man to life is to strike a blow at the corrupt system that had executed him (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Preaching Easter," *Journal For Preachers*, Easter 2006, pages 45-46). This understanding of justice explodes the truthiness of our age. It demands that we face the inconvenient facts about the world in which we live no matter what it costs.

Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that they could not duck the inconvenient implications of witnessing to the resurrection. They would have to learn to live in conflict with the spirit of their age. In the first chapter of Acts we find the disciples dealing with the inconvenient fact of Judas' betrayal of Jesus. It did not help their cause to admit that one of their leaders and the treasurer of their group had turned Jesus in. But that is exactly what they did in choosing Judas' successor. It is an action that they take because it is their calling to witness to the enduring truth that Jesus has given them. The number twelve is important to them because there were twelve tribes in Israel. Because the apostles are the transition from Christ to the church they must represent the whole people of God.

As the twelve apostles try to live out this understanding of wholeness they discover that this resurrection community includes every nation and every race. This contradicts the spirit of their age which was all about divisions and tribalism. The resurrection has struck a death blow to every form of human alienation. The rest of the book of Acts tells the unlikely story of how the truthiness of the ancient world came unraveled.

When we dare to witness to the resurrection we, too, have moments when truthiness unravels before our eyes. Susan Andrews has described such a moment. Her witness brought her to an inconvenient moment in an inconvenient place. She had come to the cancer ward of a psychiatric hospital for the destitute. There she entered an isolation unit to find a man who hardly seemed human anymore. His arms and legs were nearly consumed by gangrene. The sweat poured from his body which was shaking uncontrollably and gave off a horrible odor. In a moment of panic she wondered what she could possibly say to such a man. Then she remembered the words that Jesus had given to his disciples. She began to recite the Lord's Prayer and then the 23rd Psalm. As she said the words she could see the man begin to change. His shaking stopped. He looked into her eyes and began to say the words with her. In that moment the man was released from the spirit of our age to enter the realm of enduring truth. He traveled back to the spiritual home that he had long ago forgotten. When he died an hour later he knew he was in the hands of the God to whom he had always belonged (Kimberly Bracken Long, "The Shepherd Jesus," *Journal For Preachers*, Easter 2006, page 53).

Let us thank God for the words that Jesus has given us. These words will continue to endure when all the sand castles have washed away.