

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

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Hearing the Truth

Ephesians 1:13

The earliest record of my family in Illinois is the listing of the name of my great-great-grandfather on the roster of the militia that served in the Black Hawk War in 1832. The crisis point was reached in Northwest Illinois as Sauk Indians and white settlers laid claim to the same land. The Indians under the leadership of Black Hawk were challenging the legitimacy of treaties that required them to leave their ancestral lands and move West of the Mississippi River. In an attempt to head off the hostilities Major General Edward P. Gaines of the U.S. Army called a conference at Fort Armstrong near Rock Island. Kerry Trask has described the opening of that conference in these words:

...as the proceedings got under way one of Black Hawk's principal braves, Kinnekonesaut jumped to his feet and challenged Gaines just as the general was shuffling his notes and preparing to make his opening remarks. He said, "When white men talk, they talk from paper; but when Red men have any thing to say, they speak from the heart." Once again the deep gulf existing between the people of the oral tradition and those who were literate and white was revealed with the unambiguous implication that written words were filled with trickery and lies. Gaines became visibly irritated and made a clumsy, unconvincing response, and then proceeded to read his written address, appearing to the Sauk unwilling, or perhaps even unable, to speak to them man-to-man from the heart. To the audience it seemed a contrived performance, insincere and full of hollow words that were not really his own. They distrusted Gaines' intentions. Black Hawk cynically observed, "How smooth must be the language of the whites, when they can make right look like wrong, and wrong like right (*Black Hawk: The Battle for the Heart of America*, page 98)."

When the conference failed events quickly spun out of control. Clearly one of the reasons for this failure was Gaines' inability to communicate with the Sauk Indians. He did not understand that they saw written words as instruments of deceit and truth as the product of relationships. They could hear the truth only in the context of a community where people are free to speak from the heart. The Indians needed for Gaines to enter their community and speak from a relationship of trust. When he could not do that his attempt to promote peace was doomed.

In the 6th chapter of Mark's gospel the process of hearing the truth is described in similar terms. The disciples have just been sent out on their first mission on their own. They are traveling through the surrounding towns and villages to preach, teach, and heal in the name of Jesus. But before they return to report on the results of their work, Mark interrupts the story to make a point about the significance of their journey. Mark launches into a graphic description of the execution of John the Baptist. This is the story of a prophet who dared to speak the truth to power. It is also the story of powerful people who in the end refused to hear that truth. They chose instead to live by the lies and the half truths that no one else dared to challenge. Herod and his family lived in luxury at the pinnacle of Jewish society. They could get what they wanted when they wanted it. They lived as if they were not accountable to

anyone. When John the Baptist had the audacity to say publicly that they were accountable to God and the people, they knew how to silence him.

Mark tells this story to help his readers grasp the nature of the community the disciples were working to create. In this community people will speak from the heart to express the truth in love. In this community people will try to listen to the truth, even when it challenges the lies and half truths by which they have lived. Mark sees the church as a fellowship where people seek to be accountable to God and to one another.

This understanding of the church is affirmed in the first chapter of Ephesians. Here the church is described as a community where we experience the truth in the context of relationships. At the heart of those relationships is the grace we find in Christ. Paul argues that we are transformed by that grace. We are set free to hear the painful truths which expose the lies that are most dear to us.

Sister Joan Chittister is a leader in the Benedictine order who grew up in a religiously diverse family. Her mother was Catholic and her father was Presbyterian. While she grew up in the Catholic church she was also influenced by her Presbyterian father. From him she learned the importance of reading scripture, living with integrity, and valuing the truth. As a child she thought her family was pretty normal until one day in her second grade class some very disturbing information was communicated. That was the day that the sister teaching her class announced that Presbyterians don't go to heaven. Joan Chittister described what happened next in these words:

I can remember the terrible shock that went through my system. I mean, I was eight years old, and I knew we were in trouble. I was also very, very worried about the information. I was an only child and my father and I would commonly get home at about the same time, he from the shop and I from school. And when we walked into the house, one of them would turn to me and say, "And Joan, what did you learn in school today?" Well, that's the day I learned the blockbuster stuff, that none of my Chittister relatives were going to heaven. I shot out of that school as fast as my little legs would carry me, I took a shortcut home, I went screeching into the house. My mother was in the kitchen, and she said to me, "Well, you're home early and all excited. What happened?" I didn't say anything. She said, "Well, honey, what did you learn in school today? And I looked at her and I said, "Today I learned that Protestants don't go to heaven." She said, "Is that right?" and "What do you think about that Joan?" And I remember looking at her hard and thinking for a second, and I said, "I think that's wrong." And she said, "You do? Well if it's wrong, why do you think Sister would say it?" And I said, "Because Sister doesn't know Daddy." And I can remember her taking a step toward me and she put her arms around me, she pulled me toward her and she gave me a hug and she said to me, "You're a very smart little girl. I'm proud of you. What did you say to Sister?" And I was ashamed, and I looked down and I said, "I didn't say anything." And she said, "That's fine, dear. That was the right thing to do today. You can tell Sister later (Interview with Krista Tippet on "Speaking of Faith," American Public Media)."

Some day Sister would be held accountable for the truth she could not hear. And so shall we. Like her we have been baptized into the community which sets us free from the lies that we think we need so that we may live in the truth of the gospel.