

9.21.25 Sermon Transcript – John 8:31-36

In John's gospel, here we see Jesus looking into the eyes of his disciples, of his friends, of his family, who are living under Roman occupation. These are people who are hemmed in on many sides. These are people who are experiencing fear, poverty, hardship – all of these kinds of things. And Jesus says to them this really well-known line, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”

The last few weeks we've been talking about Howard Thurman and his book from the late 1940s, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. He was writing in the shadow of Jim Crow, and the main question that he asks in that book that we've been looking at over the last few weeks is to ask, “What does the religion of Jesus have to say to those who have their backs against the wall?” And so in his writing, which of course became a foundational text for the civil rights movement, insisted that the Gospel is not just a luxury for the comfortable, but it is, in fact, good news for the poor, and it's good news for the outcast. It's good news for the people whom he calls the disinherited. And today I want us to think a little bit about this idea of truth and the idea of integrity. The theologian Walter Wink is going to help us out with that a little bit as well. Last week I made reference to Walter Wink's concept of the “Third way.” And I'm going to share a little bit more of that with you this week.

But looking at the context of this passage in John's Gospel, In John chapter 8, Jesus is speaking to people who believed in him, to people who were following him, to people who were striving to understand what it meant that here was this person who had come and was showing them a different way. But they were also people who were entangled in competing loyalties. There was loyalty to their own heritage, loyalty to the survival strategies under the Roman Empire, loyalty to the appearance of righteousness. And so when Jesus speaks about truth here, he says, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” He's not just talking about facts or some type of intellectual assent to understanding who Jesus is. He's talking about something more. He's speaking about truth as a way of life. He's talking about truth as living with integrity, of living in alignment with God's view and hope for the world. It's living in alignment with God's love. In this text, he says, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” But in this case, it's not just Rome that enslaves. It's lies. It's self-deception. It's false allegiances. It's the refusal to name reality for what it is.

And so last week, we thought about the idea of fear as a tool of oppression, where fear pushes us to distort the truth in order to survive, in order to get by. We might hide, we might remain silent, we might even lie to protect ourselves from the wrath of those who are in power. And sometimes that is necessary, we could argue, but ultimately that fear that is the driving force corrodes our souls. Howard Thurman says that the disinherited have to find a way to live without being destroyed by fear, or hatred, or deception. And he says, Jesus offers a way, and that way is the truth. The truth offers freedom to stand with integrity, to name reality, to refuse falsehoods. This is a form of freedom, the freedom that no one and nothing, no powers, can ever crush.

When Jesus says, you will know the truth, he's not inviting the disciples, he's not inviting us, into some kind of abstract doctrine, but rather he's inviting us into a life of integrity; a life where what

we say, what we believe, and how we live actually line up. I don't know about you, but if you have children in your life, whether it's your own children or kids you're close to, you know that kids are really good at calling you out when you are failing to live with integrity or when you're failing to align your words with your actions. My kids call me out all the time when I say one thing, but I do another thing, and they remind me, "Mom, mom, this is not what you told me to do! For example, when I get frustrated and angry, you know, I want to blow up. I want to scream. And I'm always telling them, "Stop shouting!" I am not modeling for them what I'm trying to tell them to do. They remind me that I have to work hard to live with integrity, so that what I speak with my mouth, I'm also living with my life.

Jesus calls us to integrity. And for Jesus, that means consistency between words and actions. We can't praise God with our lips while cursing our neighbors with our lives or with how we live. We have to refuse to live under masks or in pretense. We don't put on a "I'm a good Christian" face on Sundays, but then live the rest of the week dishonestly, or practicing cruelty, or even just indifference to what's going on in the world around us. Integrity also means courage to stand in God's truth, even when it's costly. Integrity is refusing to go along with the crowd when you know that the crowd is wrong or the crowd is doing something harmful to others.

"You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." That is the freedom to live without fear of what everybody else is doing. It's the freedom to say, "I willingly choose to walk with Jesus. This is the path I take and there is nothing that can compromise that." Now, faithfulness to Jesus isn't about perfection. It's not about getting everything right, because Lord knows none of us do that. We all screw up, we all mess up, and we all say or do harmful things. But integrity is about our orientation. Where are we facing? Who is the one that we are looking to again and again and again? Are we looking to the one who embodied truth in the flesh and in the blood? Are we looking to the one who teaches us about the way of love, the way of self giving?

Howard Thurman reminds us that for the disinherited, the temptation is to compromise truth for the sake of one's survival, and that is a very real temptation. There may, in fact, be moments where that makes the most sense. But Jesus shows another way to keep our inner life aligned with God's love, and to resist being ruled by fear, or by hatred, or by deception.

And so I want to share with you now a little bit about Walter Wink and the way that he offers us to think about truth and integrity. Walter Wink is a theologian who has written a lot on the teachings of Jesus and how we can understand those, and he says that too often our option when faced with particular circumstances seems to be fight, where we meet violence with violence, or flight where we suffer silently and lose our dignity. But Jesus in fact offers a third way that is neither of those things, and the third way is a nonviolent resistance rooted in truth and in integrity.

Think about that famous passage in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, "If somebody strikes you, turn the other cheek. And if somebody tells you to carry their pack for one mile, carry it that extra mile, and if somebody takes your tunic, give them your cloak as well. Those are really well known passages. It was not until maybe about 10 years ago that I heard about this "Third Way" and this way of understanding these passages that I had always missed before. I had always

read these passages as saying, be passive in the face of somebody doing something harmful to you. Well, Walter Wink has helped me to see that no, these passages in the Sermon on the Mount are actually calling us to a third way. It's neither fight nor flight. Truth is the inner posture here. Integrity is the alignment of life with that truth. And this third way is how integrity gets embodied in public and in very creative ways.

So we hear, when somebody strikes you on the right cheek, then you turn the other cheek. Well, that doesn't mean simply just saying "Okay, I'm submitting, I'm going to let you do whatever you want to me." In Jesus' world, a backhanded slap to the right cheek was how superiors: masters, men, Romans, humiliated inferiors: slaves, women, Jews, et cetera. It wasn't just violence, it was about enforcing hierarchy. There was a power dynamic at play there. And it would have to be the right hand, because in that day, well, the left hand, that was for more unsavory things. So you didn't use your left hand, you used your right hand. But by offering the other cheek, the left cheek, the one who is being hit is actually forcing the one doing the hitting to strike with an open fist or an open hand so it's no longer a backhand. It has to be a punch or a forward strike, which was something that was only reserved for an equal. And so there is this mirroring back, this revealing that is taking place. It's not submission, it's not retaliation, but it is an act of nonviolent resistance that denies humiliation, that forces the one doing the striking to see the other as an equal if they are going to strike again. And it exposes the injustice or the imbalance of power and in that dynamic, so there's something about reclaiming dignity in this moment and exposing the injustice through this creative and courageous action. Now the person is probably going to get struck again, there's no denying that. But this flipping of the script, as it were, embraces this third way, this nonviolent resistance. It's not passive compliance, but it's integrity-filled defiance that's rooted in naming the reality of the situation.

Likewise, it's the same with "Go the extra mile." This was all fascinating for me when I first learned this way of understanding these scripture passages. Under Roman law, soldiers could legally press a person into carrying their pack for a mile. They could force civilians to carry their pack for a mile, but only for one mile. It was a form of domination, a reminder of, "Hey, we're here, we're in charge. We can make you do what we want you to do." But when Jesus says go the second mile, he is not teaching compliance, because carrying the pack a second mile could potentially put the soldier in jeopardy because he could be disciplined for violating that 1 mile limit. It flips the power dynamic again. Here is the person who is being forced to bear the burden of the occupying force in this case, and the soldier is the one who loses control and the civilian has taken control of the situation. It's amazing to me how reading the story in that way opens up some new possibilities. I think for us, going the extra mile isn't about like trying to impress the one who's doing the oppressing, trying suck up to them. It's, again, a creative, nonviolent method of resistance that is seeking to reveal the truth of the situation, that this is, in fact, an injustice.

And then finally, give your cloak as well. In Jesus' day and time, somebody who is poor, who was in debt, could be sued for their tunic as collateral for that debt. Their tunic could be seized. But the cloak, the outer garment, was legally protected because it was seen as essential for survival and it couldn't be seized for an overnight period of time. Forcing someone to give up their clothing was a way to strip them of dignity and to reinforce their vulnerability and their place in the hierarchy of

things. But Jesus tells the one who is in debt, "If they sue for your tunic, hand over your cloak too." Well, that would leave you naked in court. In that day and time, it was the greater shame for the viewer of one who is looking upon someone else's nakedness than for the person themselves. Think all the way back to Genesis and we have the story of Noah when he passes out drunk after they've come off of the ark. It's not Noah who experiences shame and condemnation. It's his son who goes in and looks upon Noah's nakedness. So here, here we have this idea of the disrobing the debtor unmasking the cruelty of this system. He literally humiliates or brings shame to the one who has made him do that. It's almost this satirical, dramatic act of truth telling. It robs the creditor of their power to humiliate by flipping the script again. I appreciate Walter Wink because I feel like he helps us to have some imagination in what it looks like to live in truthfulness and in integrity, in faithfulness and integrity to the way of Jesus.

Knowing the truth and allowing that truth to set us free might look like economic honesty – refusing to exploit others for profit, even if the system says, "That's just business, that's just how it works in the world." It might be through relational integrity of being trustworthy in our faith, friendships, in our marriages, in our communities, of keeping our word with one another and valuing that. It might look like having public courage of speaking the truth in public about injustice, about violence or racism, about exploitation, even when it makes us unpopular.

It's come up recently in conversation, but area that I have always struggled with is if I have been with a group of people and somebody in the group makes maybe a racist joke or something like that. I get immediately uncomfortable because I fall into that flight or freeze up mode. I don't know how to address it, I don't know what to say. I know it's wrong, I'm uncomfortable, but my non non-confrontational self has no idea how to respond. Well, I was recently taught about the art of the well-placed question. Rather than trying to say something like, "Well, that was wrong because X, Y and Z" and go on a lecture of how that's bad, to instead just simply say, "I don't understand how that's funny. I don't get it." And in doing so, that makes the person who has made that joke, or that statement have to then try to explain, which is a way of flipping the script again. Sometimes public courage might be as simple as asking a well-placed question.

It can also mean personal authenticity, refusing to hide who we are in Christ, embracing that we are beloved children of God, being willing to speak about that, to share that, to talk about how Christ has worked in our lives, but also how God sees all as beloved children of God. And it can also show up as community solidarity. Truthfulness and integrity can show up as community solidarity – standing with those who are lied about, or who are scapegoated, or cast aside, insisting their lives matter too. This isn't easy, but this is what Jesus means when he calls us to continue in his word, to remain in his way is to live truthfully, in private and in public, in our hearts and in our community.

Howard Thurman insisted that integrity is a weapon of the disinherited. I would say a tool of the disinherited. When everything else is stripped away, there is no one, no power that can fully control the inner life or the decision to stand in truth or with authenticity. Walter Wink shows us what that can look like with the third way. Truth telling creates a freedom that does not depend upon our circumstances. If the Son sets you free, Jesus says, you will be free indeed. We live in a

time where lies or even half-truths saturate our world, our society, our public life. Christian nationalism insists that violence is holy. We have so much distortion and vitriol and questions and different ways of viewing and interpreting that sometimes it is really hard to know what is truth. We find the truth when we look at the way of Jesus, when we listen to his words, when we seek to follow his actions.

Jesus calls us to integrity, to authenticity, to truthfulness. Walter Wink reminds us that the third way is in fact possible. To live truthfully without surrendering, to resist without destroying, and to stand in love with one another without being naive. Truth-telling today can look like naming injustice when others want to silence it, speaking honestly about poverty and inequality, refusing to scapegoat immigrants, or queer people, or the poor, or whoever else is being scapegoated, and living authentically without pretending to be who we are not.

That is not easy, but that is the way of freedom. Jesus says, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Howard Thurman reminds us that truth is our strength, and integrity is something that no one can steal from us. Freedom begins with truth – truth about God's love, truth about our neighbor's worth, truth about our own worth and about our own soul. In a world of fear and of deception, may we be a people of integrity and truth, rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, courageous enough to tell the truth and bold enough to live in that third way. And when we do, we'll find that even when we find ourselves in situations where our backs or the backs of those whom we love might be against the wall, that we are indeed already free. May it be so. Amen.