*Sermon for May 26, 2013*

Jeremiah 1:14-19, John 8:31-33

What is truth?

So what should we talk about today? The tornadoes that rearranged the lives and futures of so many people? Memorial Day weekend and the debt of gratitude that we owe those martyrs of this country. Who knows what today is in our liturgical calendar? Trinity Sunday, the Sunday that most pastors take off because they don’t want to cover that topic. Or is there some other nugget of truth that we want to address because as a church family we are faced with a unique reality. This past week we had a couple withdraw their membership because “the church is not what it used to be?” Isn’t that the truth. The headlines remind us constantly that our society, our country, our families are not what they used to be. But what did we hear last week. We shouldn’t ask why, it traps us, but why not which motivates us to action and solutions.

You know the Bronkema family isn’t the same. Rachel has a job at the creamery, very strange for us. So we went in and bought an ice cream, I paid with my credit card and the next thing I hear from her, my daughter behind the counter, can I see your ID? I look up and she isn’t playing, her face is dead serious and her hand is out. You can never be too sure, I guess.

I received an email this past week from a retired pastor who was commenting on the work that I and some others are doing in the Presbytery in regards to examining people as they come into the Presbytery. He was very complimentary and said our work is one of the shining lights of the Presbytery when up to now he felt that: “everything that was nailed down is coming loose.” Or can we say all the truths that we once held dear are unraveling quicker than we can react to.

Some of us feel that we want our world back and the only way to get it back is to react and make decisions of disassociations trying to find people or groups who will help us get it back. But in reality the old world is gone forever. We live in an exciting time when people are more open than ever to hear the truth because what they see is a tenuous world falling around their ears and they need something to hold onto.

So how do we respond to Pilate’s question, which is more of a plea for help, when he says: what is truth? As you would expect Jesus gives us a formula on how to discern truth. Jeremiah, on the other hand, teaches us to speak and live in truth which ultimately sets us free.

**READ**

You probably already heard this but John 8:32 is my favorite verse of all time. It became my favorite verse one evening after a basketball game in which my brother was playing and my dad, well, he wasn’t happy with the officiating and the referees were not happy with him, they won out and asked my dad to leave the gym. It was a church league and after the game an official saw my dad and quoted to him Romans 12:18 that states: if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. And my dad, without missing a beat, responded with 8:32 and said: in respect to your officiating, you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.

That’s our memory verse for today, John 8:32 and let’s go ahead and look at what’s happening in chapter 8. Jesus is speaking with a very specific group of people as described in John 8:31 on whom? The Jews who believed in him. His followers, those who were a part of the masses hanging on his every word, being fed by him both physically and spiritually. So these are people, if we are going to choose sides, they would have been on Jesus’ side.

And he is teaching them and he tells them: if you want to be a true follower, remember they already believed in him so this is for their edification, how can we have a deeper relationship with you. Jesus says, then if you continue in my word you will grow in leaps and bounds, you will really and truly be my disciple.

This word continue is used elsewhere in John, like in chapter 15, and it is translated as abide. If you want to be a true disciple, Jesus says, abide in my word. It doesn’t seem very complicated. Any of you want to walk closer and have more meaning in your Christian walks, Jesus tells us today: you just have to abide, live, be familiar with, spend a lot of time in, my word. The sense of abiding in the word is probably very different from what we do today. We have to read Scripture every day if we want to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ. II John 9 telsls us: “Everyone who does not abide in the Word of Christ,…does not have God.” The Bible is not just for some people and not for others, it is for all of us.

But be careful, because if we do become disciples, and are aware of the Scripture and the truths that are contained in it, then we will acquire information that demands we do something with it. It would be so much easier not to have any responsibilities, to not actually do something with the truth that we acquire, but that isn’t the nature of discipleship.

You see Jeremiah in our first Scripture was burdened with a prophecy that frankly was not going to be well received as prophecies don’t tend to be well received because they lift up shortcomings in society. He tells God in vs. 6: “Lord God, truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” God tells him in our verses: “I will utter my judgments against them.” Don’t worry Jeremiah, I’ve got you covered, your role is only to speak the truth that I give you, I’ll take care of the rest. Just don’t break down, or I’ll break you down. When it comes to speaking the truth, God can be convincing.

Maybe the coming apart of society is a result of the church being unsure of its role, and maybe worse yet because we don’t abide in the Word, we don’t even know the truth which is given to us and so we have given up our role. If the Word of the Lord provides the foundation for all truth, moral, spiritual, ethical, practical, theological, and we believe it does, then maybe the future of the world depends on the nerve of the preachers, of the Jeremiah’s, of those disciples gathered around Jesus wanting to learn and grow.

Jesus establishes the knowledge of the Word allows for the knowledge of the truth and that truth makes us free. Jesus provides a freedom that comes as a result from belief in him and a pursuit of truth. Keep in mind the believers in vs. 31 did not have this freedom in Christ because they were not abiding in the Word so didn’t know the truth.

Vs. 34, which we did not read today, definitively explains what we are free from when we have a life in Christ: sin. We have a freedom from sin when we abide in Christ. Galatians 5:1 tells us: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.” Sin makes us slaves to itself. We can believe in Jesus but not know His truth and so be enslaved to sin. Paul tells us in Romans chapter 6, this is your homework for Memorial Day Weekend, if you will do this just for one week you will abide in his word, he tells us that we have to choose whom we will serve: sin or Jesus. For those of you who like black and white, there you go, it is pretty clear cut.

You see sin can really weigh you down, cloud your judgment, make you a slave, not free, by being obsessed by whatever it is which leads you away from the truth you find in Scripture. What is truth? Freedom. So its converse, the opposite of truth is sin, and it leads to slavery.

In vs. 33 those to whom Jesus is speaking say: but we have never been slaves. We don’t need the freedom you provide because we’ve always been free. Is that true? Were the Jewish people always free? How could they forget the Egyptian captivity and slavery? How could they forget the Babylonian deportation when they were led away to slavery. How could they forget their current state of enslavement under the Romans?

How easy it is to forget or disregard our current addictions, our inability to live within our means because we are obsessed with living a little better than the person next to us. How easily we forget our anger at certain people which manifests itself so easily and steals our freedom by labeling us as bigots or insensitive. We would all cry out – we have never been slaves, I’m in control of my life.

Do you feel truly free right now? How easy it is for us as American’s, especially my generation, to take our political freedom for granted. The greatest generation is something we’ve heard about and not lived through. We seem to be perfectly content in enjoying the freedom without recognizing the sacrifice.

Did you know that there are groups of people in the world who don’t believe 9-11 ever took place, or that the whole Boston bombing was staged. Many in Russia believe it. Why? Because it truly is something that their government would do…stage a bombing to direct attention from something else. But the value that we place on freedom and its corresponding partner, sacrifice, is not seen in any other country where I have been.

This correlation between truth and freedom exists not only in John, but also in the political world. But one can only speak the truth, if you trust it. If you don’t trust it, you can’t preach it or live it. So we began by asking what is truth, and we discovered that Jesus is the only “Way, truth, and life and no one comes to Father except by him.” But the pursuit of Jesus and his truth provides us freedom from sin, but not, and I emphasize this, not freedom from difficulty.

Look what happens in verse 59 and how these friends or fans of Jesus react to his words – they picked up stones. With friends like these…Jeremiahs is considered the weeping prophet because he knew the truth, he spoke the truth, but no one listened. Freedom in Christ does not mean freedom from cancer, freedom from strokes, freedom from death of a loved one, freedom from depression, freedom from tornadoes even if you are a mom protecting your child in the freezer of a 7-eleven. Freedom in Christ does give us what we need to be able to say in the Words of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” and be able to transition to the end of the Psalm where the writer who feels forsaken is still able to say in the same breath: “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.”

I’m known in my family as someone who doesn’t always match my clothes as they ought. Some Sundays when I get home after the second service my girls will look at me and say, mortified, dad, you didn’t wear that to church…did you? Yes, I did, why doesn’t brown and red with grey socks and black shoes go together? The answer, you can’t pull that one off, dad. We can’t always pull it off when we live in the truth but God commands us to at least try.

This past week Pope Francis said that Jesus came on earth and died for everybody’s sin, everyone, not just Roman Catholics. You see, I told you that I liked this guy. Boy, he got in trouble for that. But that is the truth, Jesus did come to set us all free from sin. All of us. Our primary duty is to abide in Christ and know his Word and everything else will follow. We have to at least try and pull it off. Amen.