

Date: February 1, 2004

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 4

**SERMON: Truth or Consequences**

Text(s): Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30

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I imagine that most of you, as I am, are waiting with bated breath (no, not to find out who's going to win the Super Bowl. We know who's going to win, don't we?) to find out what's going to happen to Martha Stewart. Poor Martha. This week, as I've been in my car listening to NPR or at home reading the NY Times, I've learned that Martha is on trial, not for insider stock trading, as I had originally thought, but rather for lying to investigators about it. I found this rather shocking. Not that she would lie, but that she would be actually called to account for lying. What's the world coming to?

Maybe I've grown much too cynical with my advancing years, but I had more or less accepted the view of reality that says that the way you can tell when any public figure is lying, be it politicians, fashion mavens, heads of mutual fund companies or occasionally even preachers, is if their lips are moving. What a blow to cynicism! If even Martha Stewart can be prosecuted for lying about how she cashed in her chips to add a few more thousands to her already piled up millions, then which of us is safe?

Truth has always had a rather bad time at the hands of human beings. We all like to think that things in our time are worse than they were in times gone by, but I'm not sure that's really the case. In that wonderful story of human origins in the book of Genesis, the serpent lies to Adam and Eve, and then they lie to God, or at least put a pretty good spin on the truth, and it's been more or less like that ever since. We have a deeply rooted instinct, which theologians often call original sin, to speak and act in favor of our own self-centered desires. Self-interest and self-gratification appears to have a stronger influence on our behavior than a love of the truth.

As I watched the news coverage this week, and as I reflected on our lessons for today,

I remembered some profound words of Thomas Merton, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest truth-tellers. From his solitude in a hermitage in a Trappist monastery on a wooded Kentucky hillside, Merton observed the world and saw into the depths of human society and the human psyche in a way that those of us caught up in that world can only rarely see.

*"How is it that our comfortable society has lost its sense of the value of truthfulness?"* he asks. *"Life has become so easy that we think we can get along without telling the truth. A liar no longer needs to feel that his lies may involve him in starvation. If living were a little more precarious, and if a person who could not be trusted found it more difficult to get along with others, we would not deceive ourselves and one another so carelessly.*

*But the whole world has learned to deride veracity or to ignore it. Half the civilized world makes a living by telling lies. Advertising, propaganda, and all the other forms of publicity that have taken the place of truth have taught people to take for granted that they can tell other people whatever they like provided that it sounds plausible and evokes some kind of shallow emotional response. . . We would rather buy a bad toothpaste that is well-advertised than a good one that is not advertised at all."*<sup>1</sup> That's a good quote to keep in mind as we watch all those multi-million dollar, very entertaining commercials during the Super Bowl today.

A new independent film introduced at the Sundance film festival has captivated those attending. Produced by Michael Spurlock and entitled *Super-size Me: A Film of Epic Proportions*, it's a comic, but serious, look at the fast food industry and its impact on the problems of obesity in America, and increasingly around the world. Given its nature and the lobbying power of the fast food industry, it may never be released to the public, but it's apparently a rather shocking indictment of the bedrock of lies that underlies the success of that industry.

As an experiment, Spurlock, himself a tall, lean New Yorker in good physical condition

decided to make himself the guinea pig for an experiment. For one month, he would only eat at McDonald's—three meals a day— and if the person behind the counter asked, “Would you like that super-sized?” he would always say yes. He enlisted three doctors to monitor his health during the experiment. Within three days, he was attacked with bouts of vomiting; his cholesterol went from 160 to 230, his skin broke out in blotches, and he gained 30 pounds in 30 days. That makes one of the facts revealed in the film even more scary. Every day, around the world, McDonald's feeds more people than the population of Spain.

It also offers a somewhat different angle of view on the recent \$1.5 billion gift that Joan Kroc, the heiress of the McDonald's fortune gave to the Salvation Army recently, doesn't it, as well as the bill that's now before Congress, proposing to protect the fast food industry from so-called “frivolous” lawsuits of the sort that hit the tobacco industry a few years ago.

Why are we willing to buy the attractively packaged lies created by the marketing industry rather than insisting on the truth? Perhaps it's because, as Merton says, that we have lost a sense of the value of truthfulness. Truth no longer seems to us to be very important. We have reduced the notion of truth, in fact, down to the individual, psychological level. We no longer even speak of “the truth” in the sense that truth is something real in itself, “out there,” so to speak. Truth is not what is, but merely what I perceive or want it to be. We talk in the psychobabble of “my truth” or “your truth.” “This is true for me,” we say, without realizing that we are giving the game away from the beginning, for if truth is only an inner psychological state or perception, if it does not correspond to something real, something outside our own emotions of psyche, then we have no reason to base our lives on anything but a ruthless pursuit of self-interest. And instead of putting Martha Stewart on trial for lying, we ought to be

congratulating her for her acumen and shrewdness in looking after her own interests.

Neither of our lessons today give the game away so easily or quickly. In both, we find the assumption that there is such a thing as truth, and that people like us need to hear the truth and know the truth and be conformed to the truth if life is to be what God intended it should be. In both lessons, we see that God's call is a call to tell the truth. And in both lessons, we catch some glimpse of the consequences of telling the truth in a world that prefers the lie.

The Word of God comes to Jeremiah and calls him to the vocation of a prophet, a truth-teller in the public arena. *“Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”*

Now that is a powerful calling, and an enormous responsibility. It describes what the truth does when it is allowed to enter the arena of public discourse. It tears down all the edifices that are built upon cleverly packaged lies. It demolishes the structures that oppress people. It liberates those enslaved by propaganda. It transforms the systems that make profits more important than people. It lets the light shine into the darkness. It also rebuilds structures and institutions that are just in place of those which are corrupt and oppressive. Truth is powerful.

Little wonder then, that Jeremiah is so reluctant to accept that vocation to be a public truth-teller, a prophet. And with good reason! Jeremiah could foresee the likely response to this calling; that's why he resisted it. Who wouldn't? Hearing Jeremiah's objections to this calling to be a prophet, to be God's truth-teller, reminds me of a cartoon I once. It showed Moses standing on Mt. Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments from God. Moses is saying to God, “Are you sure you can't change that fifth one so that it tells them, ‘Honor thy father and thy mother *and thy prophet?*’”

Jesus, as Jeremiah before him, discovered the dangers of telling the truth in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his public ministry. The first reaction of his relatives and neighbors was favorable. When he announced his vocation in the words of the prophet Isaiah, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor, to open the eyes of the blind, to set the captives free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,”* St. Luke says that *“all spoke well of him, and all wondered at the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth.”* We can see it now. The local newspaper carries the headline, “Hometown boy makes good.” People are proud of him. He gives them visibility. They know his parents and his family. This feeling of community pride lasts all of about one minute, however, just until he begins telling them the truth about themselves. When he quotes an old proverb reminding them of their less-than-magnificent record of honoring the prophets who have told them the truth, their pride turns to fury. How dare he imply that there is anything wrong with them? Luke says that they are so enraged that Jesus would dare to tell them the truth that they actually try to murder Jesus by throwing him off the cliff on which the town is built.

It’s an old story, isn’t it? We’ve seen it happen repeatedly in our own times. When Ghandi told the truth about the oppression of British rule in India, all Indians, of whatever religion or caste, loved him for it. He was the national hero. But when he told them the truth about themselves, about the injustice of the caste system, about the folly of the hatred between Hindus and Muslims, his own Hindu community assassinated him.

The examples could be multiplied. None of us likes to hear the truth, if that truth challenges our motives or attitudes or behavior. We don’t want someone setting a plumb-line alongside us and revealing how crooked we are. Yet, it is precisely when we acknowledge our

crookedness—when we tell the truth— that our lives begin to get straightened out. Anyone who has ever struggled with an addiction and found healing in one of the twelve-step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, knows that the very first step toward recovery is telling the truth to oneself about being addicted. Healing cannot begin as long as we continue to lie to ourselves about ourselves. Lying to ourselves makes it easier to lie to others as well, and then our relationships are poisoned.

Thomas Merton’s words are useful again here: *“We make ourselves real by telling the truth,”* he says. *“Man can hardly forget that he needs to know the truth, for the instinct to know is too strong in us to be destroyed. But he can forget how badly he also needs to tell the truth. We cannot know truth unless we ourselves are conformed to it.”*

And that’s the real tragedy of our tolerance of, and preference for, the lie. We become incapable of knowing the truth when we see it. It’s like being in the funhouse at the circus and looking into those mirrors that grotesquely distort our image. Because the mirror is distorted and skewed, it can never reflect back to us a true image of ourselves or the world around us. So when we do not tell the truth or live the truth, we can never recognize either the good for what it really is, or evil for what it really is. We lose the faculty of discernment.

*“We must dare to think what we mean and simply make clear statements of what we intend,”* says Merton, *“That is our only serious protection against repeated spiritual defilements by the slogans and programs of the unscrupulous.”*

One of the things Ghandi did was to observe every Friday as a day of silence, of fasting from speech. He did this, he said, to protect speech from pollution and to bear witness that words are sacred means by which human beings interact with one another and form a true community. When talk is cheap, truth is the

victim. We need to recover the sacredness of words if we are going to have a redemptive word to speak to the world around us.

And that is our calling, as it was the calling of Jeremiah and Jesus— to speak the truth in a world that lives by the lie, and to discover that by telling the truth, we have the power to pluck up and to pull down, to build and to plant.

It won't be easy. Reality is often harder than illusion, truth can hurt more than the lie. Or as Jamie Buckingham once put it, "the truth will make you free, but first it will make you miserable." That saving misery is easier to bear in company, and that is why we need to be part of a community that commits itself to live by the truth. That's why we need to be accountable to one another. We're the Body of Christ, after all, as we remind ourselves each time we come together around the Lord's Table. Here we remember a death inflicted by the violence of lies, and here we remember a life restored by the power of the One who is Truth, and whose word creates life out of death. And here, too, we remember the Risen One's promise, "*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*"

1. All quotes from Thomas Merton are from his essay "Sincerity" in No Man Is An Island, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955.