

Believe, Belong, Become: Speak Truth by Holly C. W. Aastuen  
May 20, 2018 John 8:1-11

This is the third sermon in our series: Believe, Belong, Become where we are talking about how our status as beloved children of God calls us to become people who bravely speak the truth in love. We began the series talking about the wilderness experience some of us are in, then talked about how to keep healthy boundaries to protect us from harm as well as empower us to talk with those with whom we disagree. Today we're further exploring what it means to speak the truth, especially in circumstances where truth is rare.

This series is based on a book by Dr. Brene Brown and her chapter on today's topic is entitled, "Speak Truth to B. S. Be Civil."

We've all experienced it at one time or another, listening to someone speaking complete hogwash or B.S. without any regard for the truth. Often those speaking say what they say with such conviction and persistence that it's hard not to doubt what you believe to be true.

In a previous church I knew a man who would speak a stream of words that would carry you to whatever conclusion he wished you to have. He had the gift of being able to carry on an entire conversation by himself and without even an 'uh huh' from me, could talk for a half an hour or more about what interested him, which was usually the church finances and how they needed to be allocated, spent or saved. He wasn't speaking complete hogwash, but he was sharing and spreading his way of looking at a given situation and someone like me, who needed pauses between words to think of what I might say in response, was left to simply listen.

When we talk about speaking truth to BS, I think about its close relative, speaking truth to power, because often the person who us speaking hogwash is doing so, so they can assert their power and influence on a given topic or circumstance.

The hogwash we're talking about today isn't mere lying, but is even more harmful because while lying is defying the truth, hogwash is wholesale dismissal of the truth. When you're dealing with a person who is intentionally or unintentionally completely ignoring the truth, especially when it is your truth, then you're getting into the realm of harm.

Remember when you were a kid and you were caught doing something you shouldn't do and you lied about it? You knew full well, for example, that you had eaten the last cookie from the cookie jar, but you didn't admit to your mother you had, because you had already eaten your fair share. So you lied about it so as to not get into trouble.

The B.S. we are talking about today is not simply lying about eating the last cookie, but refusing to acknowledge that there was a cookie there in the first place. Hogwash is when you've convinced yourself to the very core of your being that cookies never existed in your home and your mother never went to the hard work of making cookies in the first place. Hogwash is a dismissal of everyone else's reality and replacing it with your own.

This is a difficult situation to find yourself in, because the person spouting the hogwash is making you question your sanity, your reality and everything you once believed.

One of the many things that I find attractive about Jesus is that he never let himself be pinned down by those who were trying to trap him. He never questioned what he believed. He always had a laser like focus on who he was, and who he was following. When people would try and pin Jesus down on exactly who they needed to love and who they were allowed to hate, Jesus wouldn't let them get off that easily. A classic example comes in our scripture reading for today from John, chapter 8. The priests and Pharisees in Jerusalem were looking for a reason to arrest him. In the chapter previous to today's reading, Jesus was teaching in the temple and the priests and Pharisees sent guards to arrest him, but the guards came back empty-handed. The day ended, the religious leaders went to their own homes and this is where today's reading begins:

*And Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he returned to the temple. All the people gathered around him, and he sat down and taught them. The legal experts and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery. Placing her in the center of the group, they said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?" They said this to test him, because they wanted a reason to bring an accusation against him. Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground with his finger.*

*They continued to question him, so he stood up and replied, "Whoever hasn't sinned should throw the first stone." Bending down again, he wrote on the ground. Those who heard him went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Finally, only Jesus and the woman were left in the middle of the crowd.*

*Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Is there no one to condemn you?"*

*She said, "No one, sir."*

*Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, don't sin anymore."*

The religious leaders were seeking to trap Jesus. They weren't concerned about the woman so much as they were wanting to confront Jesus and present him with a false dichotomy: 'Either tell us to stone this woman or you don't believe in the Law of Moses.' They were confronting Jesus with their version of the truth, which only allowed for two options in their argument about the law.

Jesus began that day in the Temple, where he sat down and taught the people. Sitting in the Temple was what the rabbis did when they had something important to say. They wouldn't stand behind a pulpit, they would sit, signaling that they were about to speak. The Pharisees didn't make their move until a crowd had gathered. Then they came to

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him and essentially said, 'Either you agree with the law or you disregard it only when the law doesn't work to your liking.

They thought they had caught him by bringing before him this adulterous woman. The question that always arises in my mind when I read this story is: Where was the man? Shouldn't he be held accountable, too?

But the truth is that this story is not really about adultery at all, it is about catching Jesus. They were using her to get at him.

Jesus responded by writing in the dirt. According to Jewish law, the day after a Sabbath feast, in this case the day after the harvest feast called the Feast of Booths, Jewish people were not allowed to work. The law considered writing to be work, but writing in the dirt isn't work because it doesn't make a permanent record. Jesus was demonstrating that he knew the law, that he knew what was and wasn't allowed on the day after a Sabbath feast. He also acknowledged that this woman should be stoned to death according to the law, but that whoever is without sin should be the one to cast the first stone. He's leaving it in the hands of the crowd to understand the horrible nature of this particular law, by making them see their own sin.

And so, the story continues, the elders drop the stones they held in their hands to hurl at the woman. The elders have lived long enough to know they have sinned a time or two and know when they have been called out for their sin. The idealistic younger ones eventually follow suit and drop their stones to the ground.

Jesus continues to write in the dirt, not watching or gloating or reveling in his victory. He works with the dirt and gives everyone in the crowd dignity in their departure. At the same time, he gives the woman her dignity. Jesus doesn't get caught up in the hogwash of the religious leaders. He refuses to play their game. He shows that one can both respect the law and be merciful.

Being civil when we're calling out B.S. is crucial to protecting our connection. In Dr. Brene Brown's book she writes:

*Civility is claiming and caring for one's identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process...(Civility) is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences...Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements...it is about negotiating interpersonal power such that everyone's voice is heard and nobody's is ignored. (p. 96 Braving the Wilderness)*

We all want to civil. But sometimes it is difficult when emotion is involved. When someone is getting emotional it is often easy to get hooked and start to get emotional ourselves.

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When our first son was about to enter middle school, the principal of our Middle School said during parent orientation that our children were about to get on a roller coaster.

They would experience high highs and low lows. They'd be convinced they're living the best life ever when something goes well with school or with their friends and then the next minute there'll be tears and slammed doors because everyone's against them.

When working with Middle School students whose hormones are working overtime and causing all sorts of things to be wacky, it's best to watch them ride the roller coaster of emotions, but to not get on the roller coaster with them or even buy a ticket.

Being civil to BS means not buying a ticket to that person's particular roller coaster.

Many of us have seen someone, or have ourselves been ones to share unsubstantiated information with others. Sociologists have studied this phenomenon of fake news and how it often travels faster than real news. This phenomenon has at its source the secret glee we feel when we find some bit of information that is outrageous and it triggers not only our outrage but our need to be seen as knowledgeable, as knowing something that others don't. And so we share rumors or stories that we believe to be true often because they support what we already believe.

But sharing fake news doesn't help anyone.

We need to speak truth, be civil and share Christ's love wherever we may be, following Christ's example by never throwing stones at others or allowing those in our presence to throw stones. For none of us is without sin, we are all sinners in need of Christ's redeeming. We need to speak truth to power and while we're doing it, demonstrate Christ's love.

Let us pray. Jesus, help us to be peacemakers, to be the kind of community that holds differing opinions and respects one another. Holy Spirit, be our Advocate, defend us from tempting ways of fake news and winning verbal battles and help us to give everyone the dignity they deserve as beloved children of God. Amen.