



# “Speaking the Truth about Ourselves”

Text: 1 John 1:5-10

*a sermon by the Rev. Joe Easley*

**October 25, 2020**

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Before starting today, I want to test out the effectiveness of sermons in general, so I need a little audience participation: How many of you remember something about the last sermon you heard? Whether that was last Sunday or while back. I'll give you 10 seconds to think... Now raise your hand if you remember something about that sermon. Good! Now a little tougher: How many of you remember something about the last sermon you heard from Pastor Kevin before he went on sabbatical? Don't worry, I won't tell him. OK, 10 seconds again. Thanks again. Finally, how many remember a sermon you heard before you were age 20? Think, then show your hands if you do. Frankly, I'm not surprised.

Whether or not something is in our memory can be a factor of many things: it may not have been very memorable to begin with; we might not have been paying attention at the time; or a lot of things have happened since and crowded out earlier memories. Plus, something can still have an impact on us even if we do not recall it well.

I confess I would probably not do better than most of you on this test. I have vague memories about maybe 4 sermons I heard before the age of 20, but for most I only recall the setting and preacher, but nothing about the message. However, I remember one sermon I heard in late high school or early college. It was preached by my uncle, when he was invited back to our home church. My uncle was 9 years younger than my dad, and thus was closer to my age. He had felt the call to ministry as a youth, much as I had at the end of High School.

**We** went to the same seminary in Dayton, Ohio - 20 years apart - which was part of the Evangelical United Brethren Church - now United Methodist. He was an EUB pastor for about 5 years. Then he transferred to the Presbyterian Church, in which he served 4 churches over the next 40 years. He was invited back to our home church in Clay City, IN, while he was pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Urbana, IL.

**No, the fact he was a Presbyterian** was not why I remembered his sermon. It stuck because it was significantly different from anything I had heard before: He said that people need to acknowledge their failings to another person.

That sounded like Catholic confession. But he was not deserting Protestant belief that it is God who forgives us; nor was he saying we have to hear absolution from a pastor. Rather, **he was saying each of us** as an individual **has a need to be honest**, when we have done something wrong, and part of what helps us to be honest to ourselves and God is to say it aloud to another trusted person.

I don't remember, but he very likely quoted today's scripture passage, which says in part: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make God a liar, and God's word is not in us." [1 John 1:8-10] John is insisting to readers then and now of our humanity and our flaws. He is saying we have to recognize these to be truthful and whole. To pretend we have never failed in loving God with our whole self and loving our neighbors as ourself **will separate us from God. That is when** "the truth is not in us".

Jesus says, "God's word is truth", and that word can dwell in us, **but it can't** if we live in falsehood - which is antithetical to God. Note that John is not saying this **to make his hearers feel guilty**, nor to tell them they are evil and unredeemable; rather, he points out that **once we acknowledge** how we miss the mark, there is a remedy: God **will** forgive us and give us a clean slate. As a beautiful Collect used in Anglican churches says: "God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray" - And I would add "more ready to forgive than we are to ask." There is no doubt God can deal with our failures, but we are not open to receive God's grace unless we are honest with God and ourselves.

My uncle might also have quoted James 5 [15b 16b]: "**anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.**"

We in Protestant circles have been too prone to see everything about our relationship with God as private, exclusive, just me and God. Indeed, we can - and should - cultivate a 1-on-1 relationship with God, **but that relationship is always in the context of a community.**

As Americans, we tend to read everything in individual terms, but the Bible most often speaks communally. In modern English "you" is both the second person singular and plural, and we tend to think every time we hear Jesus or Paul say "you" he spoke to some individual or it's a promise or warning to me alone, but most often in the Greek - and Hebrew - the "you" is plural - it is addressing us as a community - so it would be better translated by either the old English "ye" or "all ye" or the Southern colloquialism "you-all". God and scripture know we are in this together.

We need one another - even in the process of forgiveness. I'm not suggesting we each stand up in worship and enumerate our sins in deed, word, and thought each week. **Not a good idea!** It could be either extremely embarrassing or a put-on show. It would also make the service really long. Still, there is something very powerful about saying something out loud. Facing the truth about ourselves in the presence of someone else is **both** painful **and** a healing process. It makes things real - both our failings and our forgiven-ness!

This truth is expressed well in something I am almost certain my uncle did quote. The 5<sup>th</sup> step in AA and other 12-Step programs is: [We] "Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." Recovering alcoholics are some of the most honest persons I know, because they are working the steps. Getting through step 5 is certainly hard, but it takes a real load off a person, as they breathe the truth - exhaling failing, inhaling grace.

This is not a truth for addicts alone; it is true for each and every one of us. We are all addicted to something - often to protecting our own self-image. We all have things we don't want to admit, **but we can find healing** by doing so, and that process is **enhanced by sharing it** with another person too. This is why we have:

**therapists** to help us face the truth of where we are and figure out where to go;

**spiritual guides** to help us discern God's presence and calling in our lives;

**soul friends** with whom we can be completely honest; and

**accountability groups** where we will always be loved but also pushed to be transparent - **for the sake of our growth.**

Let me be clear, I am not wanting to emphasize our so called "depravity". In my mind that is not helpful, and it is only a portion of the truth. The biblical Good News lies in the **combination** of Genesis 1, where God pronounces creation, including humans, "very good", **and** Genesis 3, where Adam and Eve's story tells us we have all fallen. Or as Paul puts it in Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Our wholeness is in recognizing both our blessedness and our fallenness. Again, this isn't a private process, **and it is also not strictly about us individually.** This process also applies to us corporately - as part of a community, nation, world. Again, we tend to hear the challenge of Jesus and the Prophets as addressed to us individually, but most of the time they were addressed to society.

So, we need the same honesty about our corporate life, as our individual lives. We are accountable not just for our personal failings, **but also for those in which we participate** as part of a society. For example, I have been learning about racism much of my life **but especially** the last 2½ years, since I first saw a video by Robin DeAngelo explaining white privilege:

It is clearly better in this country to have white skin; of course, we do not choose that, so there is no guilt for being White. However, we are responsible for what we do with our lives and how we participate in our world.

Once we recognize the inequities in our society by race, we have to face that as honestly as we face our own personal failing. People of Color have always known about the inequities in our society, but if they didn't affect us personally, they was easy for us to overlook or to see as a rare happenstance. We "know" we aren't a racist, because we do not harbor personal animosity toward people who were Black or Brown.

What Robin DiAngelo's video impressed on me **indelibly** is that this kind of **conscious, chosen dislike** isn't **the only** form of racism nor **the most prevalent.** Of course, the overt racism of the KKK is awful and we condemn it, but in addition to that explicit bias there are implicit bias and systemic racism, which are mostly invisible - **if we are White.**

Implicit biases are the subtle things we inherit from our upbringing and culture (without realizing they are present) and which affect our thoughts and actions. They operate outside of one's awareness and can be in direct contradiction to a person's espoused beliefs and values. They can unconsciously affect how we view other people and lead us to say and do things that we don't realize are offensive to someone else.

Systemic bias is “the tendency for the procedures and practices of particular institutions to operate in ways which result in certain social groups being advantaged or favored and others being disadvantaged or devalued. This need not be the result of any conscious prejudice or discrimination but rather of the majority simply following existing rules or norms.” Systemic racism is mostly invisible, **if we are not its victims**, and may be largely unintentional; **however**, it results in unequal outcomes by race, in education, housing, wealth, employment, law enforcement, etc. Some of this has become visible to many more people since May, when videos of the killings of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd surfaced and went viral.

BRIDGE, a local organization I helped start, has been offering programs for 4 years to help people understand and address implicit bias and systemic racism. As people of faith, what do we do when we recognize we have failed as part of our society in how it treats some people, **and** whole groups have suffered because of it?

We handle this same way as personal failings: We acknowledge it to ourselves, confess it, seek God’s forgiveness, **and talk about it with others**. All of that helps us to repent, which in the Bible is not so much saying we did wrong and we’re sorry, **as it is changing our mind and our behavior**. An essential step in that process is to face the problem honestly and out loud. South Africa modeled this in 1995, when it moved from minority-ruled Apartheid to a racially inclusive nation. Their Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigated past atrocities, not for the sake of punishing the perpetrators, but to honestly acknowledge their broken past so they could move ahead together. Much as a step in overcoming addiction involves admitting to God, ourselves, and another person the exact nature of our wrongs, the only way our nation can overcome racism is to face it honestly by talking about it.

That means we have to learn how we got here by studying American history with fresh eyes to see not just our best intentions but also how we fell far short of them in slavery and its aftermath, the treatment of Native Americans, the internment of Japanese Americans and so much more.

Will that be unpleasant? **Yes, but** it is the only way to get to healing - for ourselves, for the people who have suffered and still suffer because of our history, **and for our nation**.

Some of the things to which I have committed myself are: reading and participating in experiences to uncover my own implicit bias, developing relationships with people of other races and listening to them, studying **the American history that I didn’t learn in 11<sup>th</sup> Grade**, and working with others to change policies and procedures that still do harm.

So, I think I’m still learning from my uncle’s sermon 50+ years ago about the importance of confession out loud, repentance, and the grace of God that works through these. I hope that message speaks to all of us and motivates us to make changes - both personally and as a community and nation, **for in that is healing**.