

## Telling the Truth When it Matters

By: Jon Heerboth

March 10, 2021. In tonight's testimonial, Jon Heerboth reflects on telling the truth. He relates the story of a young student who confessed the truth of his actions after 60 years of carrying the guilt around with him, and contrasts it with the story of Jesus cleansing the temple, telling the truth as he saw it and facing the consequences immediately.

Readings: [Mark 11:15-19](#), [1 Corinthians 1:22-25](#)

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

Aren't we lucky to hear this same, wonderful story about Jesus cleansing the temple twice in one week? We had the lesson from John on Sunday, and my favorite version of this story from Mark tonight. So crisp, and Mark always leaves you wanting a little more.

But tonight I want to talk to you about Frieda Peck. Frieda Peck was a legend in the school district I served for the last ten years prior to my retirement. She was a high school teacher for many years, and then became the high school principal in our small town, when the high school was the center of community life. Ms. Peck, according to her former students — all of whom were in their 70s and 80s — was an intimidating woman. They knew when she spoke, she meant business.

In 1956 Ms. Peck disciplined a boy, who came back that night and threw a brick through the principal's window. (It was one of those that was reinforced with metal wire. We used to see that back then.) He was angry about some discipline action and took it out on the school. He was too scared of the consequences to ever bring himself to fess up.

In 2015 I received a letter from him in my office, and a \$50 check. The young man — who was now an old man — was dying, and he wanted to confess and make good on the damage he did almost sixty years before. He carried that guilt around with him all his life. This sort of thing happened to me several times in my career as a school administrator. As people neared the end, they wanted to make something that had been wrong in the past into something that was right for them.

So at the point of death, the man felt compelled to tell the truth and somehow to make this right. I guess he felt better about himself, but that truth didn't matter anymore. I asked around. No one had seen him in the decades after high school. In 1956 he was angry, and then he was afraid when he realized what he had done. He couldn't face up to the truth, and it affected his life to the point of his death. But according to his obituary he was a good and faithful family man, who regularly volunteered to visit and minister his faith to people who were in prison. The lapse in behavior from his school days did not keep him from having a good life.

Jesus, on the other hand, faced the truth immediately when he walked through the temple grounds in the gospel for today. At that time people believed that goods and wealth were finite, so that one person's gain was another person's loss. Calling the temple square a "den of robbers," where thieves stored their stolen goods that others might have had, was a harsh condemnation. Jesus called it like he saw it. I can imagine the disciples with him at the time. "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus! Wait a minute," they might say. "Lighten up, man. You're going to get us all killed." But Jesus was willing to face the immediate consequences of telling the truth as he saw it.

The business of the temple was to enrich the traders, the priests, the Romans — at the expense of the poorer people. “Don’t you know,” Jesus said, “This is supposed to be a house of prayer for all the nations?” A place of prayer for all nations. That’s the truth he was willing to risk death to pronounce. Jesus calls our church to confront the truth of our own mission, to proclaim the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of Christ.

You’ll recall, I’m sure, the lesson from last Sunday from 1 Corinthians: For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Who was scared of Jesus’ truth? It was the people he spoke against — the temple bigwigs. Jesus had his listeners spellbound, the text said. He paid the price for it later when they crucified him. But his teaching and truth-telling left the people spellbound, and the leaders were terrified of that.

One of Ms. Peck’s former students told me that he spent four years terrified of the woman. And then, on their senior class trip to Chicago, she took them all dancing and they had the time of their lives. Sometimes the truth is tough to discern when we don’t have the wisdom to separate our fears from truth. Let’s grasp our truth: that Jesus suffered, died, and rose so that together we are free to confess our sins, embrace our forgiveness, and be people of prayer and service to all the nations.

Thanks be to God.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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