

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

Truth-Telling

September 15, 2018

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

*One of my favorite games to play with teenagers is called 2 Truths and a Lie. Each person takes an index card and he or she writes on it two true statements about him/herself and one lie. Once everyone has written on their card, the cards are given to the leader who reads each one out loud. The group is tasked with identifying who wrote each card and which statement on the card is a lie. Let's play!

I've asked our Board President, Vice-President, and Treasurer to submit two truths and a lie. I have their responses here.

Gary, Jamie, and Gordon, will you come and stand here so the folks who don't know you very well can get a good look at you?

I will read all of their responses and we will first decide which list belongs to each of them and then we will guess which statement in each one's list is a lie.

(Play Game)

My favorite beer is New Castle Brown Ale.

My wedding ceremony was shown on News Channel 6 in Tulsa.

John Wayne was my cousin.

I am a published author.

One year, for Halloween, I dressed in drag and went into a stranger's home.

While in Washington DC, I met Vladimir Putin.

I went to college on a Home Economics scholarship.
I played the sousaphone in high school band.
My favorite food is blackberry cobbler.

Over the years, I've played this game with a good number of youth and adults, learning a lot about people along the way. One time, I was playing with a group of junior high students. One of the students' statements was "My parents are getting a divorce." All of his peers guessed that this statement was the lie. Unfortunately, it was true. And the game was over...because sometimes telling the truth about ourselves, our feelings, and our lives, is really uncomfortable. But in order to have meaningful relationships and have a shot at creating space for everyone to belong, we have to be willing to risk telling the truth.

*The text Dianne read for us today gives us the opportunity to talk about truth-telling and to think about how our willingness to tell the truth can be life-giving to the ones whose truth has been silenced.

Before we talk about this story of Abraham and Sarah, I want to remind us of where we are in the biblical narrative. Last week, we read Genesis 2, the second of two creation stories in the Bible. By the end of the story, we had a fully created world, complete with two human beings. There are a lot of great stories between that story and today's text. Allow me to quickly summarize...the first humans struggled to live their best lives, as did their descendants. They found that life outside of Eden, was real and hard and not always abundant. Generations came and went and then along came Abraham who was called by God to leave his home and his family and in exchange, God told him, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great."

Abraham was faithful and did as he was told, taking his wife and his brother's son, Lot, and all of their possessions, and their slaves and went to Canaan. Once there, Abraham built an altar to the Lord and moved on, first to the hills of Bethel and then the Negeb. There was a famine, so Abraham went to Egypt and resided there as a refugee. When the famine was over, Abraham and his family went back to Canaan where he and Lot separated, Lot choosing the plain of the Jordan River, near Sodom, and Abraham settling in Hebron. God, remember, promised Abraham land and offspring. So far, the offspring had not come to be and the clock was ticking. At the age of 86, Abraham did, at Sarah's insistence, father a son with Sarah's slave, Hagar. We don't have time to delve into this today, but in Hagar's story, we should read the possibility that getting with Abraham to make a baby was not what she wanted. But she was a slave and he was a man in a patriarchal world. Hagar's son's name was Ishmael.

As you might imagine, after Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, her relationship with Sarah deteriorated to the point that Sarah "dealt harshly with her" and Hagar ran away. We have talked before about the importance that was placed on women bearing children in that time and place. The ability to bear children was considered a blessing from God, while barrenness was a Divine curse. When a husband and wife could not have children, it was the woman's fault and it was her shame to bear. And this is where we find Abraham and Sarah the day the three strangers arrived at their door, two elderly people, whose hope in God's promises to them had faded.

To begin, it's appropriate, I think, that we tell the truth about how this story has impacted women and men who have struggled with infertility. We have been taught this story was written to remind us that, if we are faithful to God, God will "bless" us, specifically with children. Guess what? The truth is there are many, many faithful, beautiful, people who want more than anything to bring children into this world and are

unable to do so. They have everything it takes to be fabulous parents...patience, compassion, love, and the ability to put the needs of others ahead of their own. But they are unable to conceive. And it is devastating. It is painful. It is life-changing. But it is not because they are not “blessed” by God. That is the truth. My prayer for all struggling with infertility is that they will know God’s love and comfort and that their dreams of becoming parents will be fulfilled beyond what they imagine today.

There was something about the three men that came to Abraham and Sarah’s tent that day that made it clear to Abraham that God was present in them or through them. And so, he did all the right things...he gave them water to wash their feet, provided a cool, shady spot for them to rest, and made sure there was plenty of good food. While they were enjoying Abraham’s hospitality, they asked him where Sarah was and when he responded that she was in the tent, one of the strangers said (loud enough so she could hear them), “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

Sarah, over-hearing the remark, responded by laughing to herself and what I would call, sarcasm saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”

Her response is what I want us to focus on. There is not widespread agreement among scholars about what the writer was trying to tell us with Sarah’s laughter. People laugh for different reasons. We laugh because something is genuinely funny, like a good joke or a pun at exactly the right time. Or we laugh because we are full of joy, like when someone we love does a good thing or when we hear the sound of a toddler’s belly laugh. Or we laugh to demean someone, in other words, we make fun of someone and laugh *at* them. Or, and I think this is the reason Sarah laughed, we laugh when we are uncomfortable, either because we are skeptical or because we don’t want to show others how we really feel.

I tend to think Sarah's pain and disappointment were so intense that she didn't want to go there. And I think, wrapped up in that, was her doubt that what God had promised was even possible. She had waited a very long time. So, when she heard the visitor, presumably speaking for God, say she was going to have a baby, she laughed...that uncomfortable, forced kind of laugh. In her book, *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*, Ellen Frankel wrote about Sarah's laughter by framing the discussion around what would happen if contemporary Jewish women had the opportunity to ask Sarah herself why she laughed. Frankel writes this as Sarah response, "Having overheard my secret thoughts, God misrepresented my laughter to Abraham, implying that it showed my lack of faith, boasting to him, 'Is anything so wondrous for God?' Yet it was not at God that I laughed but at myself, at my own foolish fantasy. For I thought, 'Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment---with my husband so old?' When God took me to task, I denied my laughter not because I doubted God's capacity for miracles but because I doubted my own" (Frankel, 23).

Sarah was unable to tell the truth about how she felt and so she **lied**. Sarah **lied** about how she was feeling. "Lie" is such a harsh word. So harsh, in fact, that I learned this week of a family that did not allow the children to say the word "lie." Instead, they were taught to say that someone "told a story." That sounds nicer, doesn't it? "The minister told a story about how many cookies she ate at the potluck." "The wife told a story about how great her husband looks in plaid." These examples of not telling the truth seem pretty harmless, but telling the truth is important. Allowing ourselves to be fully seen and to fully see other people is one of the ways in which we will create a world in which everyone feels a sense of belonging, in which everyone knows they have worth and are loved.

Some of us are reading Eric Law's book, *Holy Currencies: 6 Blessings for Sustainable Missional Ministries* and getting together to talk about it. As I mentioned last week, the book is based on the idea that there are six elements that must flow through a church or any organization, including, I think, families, in order for them to be sustainable and healthy. Last week, in my sermon, I talked about the currency of relationships and the importance of connecting with people in meaningful ways. I mentioned that our relationships with other people keep us safe and remind us that we belong. Our relationships have tremendous power for good or for destruction in the world.

In addition to relationships, Law highlights the currency of truth as an element that must flow freely in our lives. Sarah was so uncomfortable with her truth that she hid herself, from God and from her husband by lying. Somewhere along the way in our lives, we are taught to lie if the truth will make someone feel bad or uncomfortable. I'm not talking about, "Do you like my new hair color?" Or, "Is that the best cilantro and brussel sprout salad you've ever had?" I'm talking about telling the truth about how an appropriate joke makes us feel. Or telling the truth about how you might experience the world differently from other people. It is only when we tell the truth that we can begin to understand that there are multiple points of view and they can all be true.

*Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "Differences are not intended to separate, to alienate. We are different precisely in order to realize our need for one another." Yes, we need each other. We each have our own truth, but THE TRUTH is something we all have to figure out together. And in order to do so, we have to be willing to be vulnerable and speak our own truth, even if it makes people uncomfortable. The example Law uses in the book is the difference in "truth" between what U.S. history books presented as fact when I was in school, that Columbus discovered America. If we were to ask our indigenous

siblings, their truth would be very, very different. And still today, there are people who get bent out of shape at the suggestion that Columbus Day be replaced by Indigenous People day. Law writes, “When we simply accept the dominant point of view as the truth, we are not seeing the whole truth. We do not have the whole truth unless we listen and understand the experiences of the historically powerless.”

*The Church exists to tell the truth...to tell the truth about systemic racism, to tell the truth about the oppression of members of the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, women, to tell the truth about the value of children, the wisdom of our elders, to tell the truth about all the things that deny the worth of anyone or anything God created and most importantly, to tell the truth about God’s love for everybody, the truth that there is new life around every corner, and the opportunity for our skeptical, uncomfortable laughter to turn to the kind of laughter that laughs *with* all of God’s people as, together, we celebrate life. Like the new life Sarah and Abraham celebrated in Isaac. Like the new life of someone who has chosen sobriety for today. Like the new life of a relationship repaired, a dream come true, a new cure, a world-changing invention, a piece of art that inspires us to do better, or the opportunity to try something new or to try again at something familiar.

Let us tell the truth, about ourselves, about the world, and about God. And let us laugh with our neighbors as we fully see and fully love one another. Amen.