

Offending a Postmodern World

The Prophet Speaks the Truth

Introduction- "They judge by the flights of feelings..."

It is unlikely that many of you recognize the name Susan Otey, although it might be well if you did. She represents the demise of the prophetic office in many ways. Not only does she occupy an office not given to women, but, more significantly, for this text, she demonstrates this generation's intent to abandon the concept of truth and substitute, in its place, feelings, as criteria for making judgments.

Susan Otey was the first Montana "clergy-person" to officiate, on November 20, 2014, at a homosexual marriage. Although the action was contrary to the teaching of her denomination, (United Methodist), and to the vows she took when she entered that profession, she had a ready answer. "I really felt that God was calling me to be part of that...I would say that sometimes, to stand with the love of Jesus Christ for all people, you have to break a vow you've taken."¹ (Emphasis added.)

Ms. Otey was able to leap at least three hurdles, which previous generations have found daunting. The truth of God's Word was a low hurdle, having suffered many attacks through the years as bound to the time in which it was written. The vows she made to God and to His people were no constraint, because she felt differently in the present than she did when she made them.

What might have stopped the modern mind in its tracks, seemed the lowest hurdle of all. She is able to function without a concept of truth. "I spent a lot of time in prayer about it, trying to discern whether this was right for me... I have this strong belief that God does not want any of His beloved children to feel shame..."² (Emphasis added.) Anthony Esolen, in an article on the missionary task in the 21st century, complains of this generation, "They judge by flights of feeling..."³ The indictment stands against Susan Otey. It was not an objective truth, it was not even the truth of the attending circumstances that drove her decision. It was the absolutely insular drive of her feelings that lifted her over all obstacles to the contrary.

I am keen to note, from a modern perspective, the thickness of the irony attending the event of that wedding. Here stands a "Pastor," presumably chosen for the sake of the integrity of the office, asking two people to be faithful to their vows, while simultaneously, breaking hers. Yet, judged by postmodern standards, the irony dissipates, for in the present world, both actions are motivated by personal emotions, making them entirely consistent.

I intend, in this present offering, to demonstrate that we are rapidly moving in the direction of a world devoid of the concept of truth, which absence, will create consternation for the prophetic office, an office dedicated to the proclamation of truth. I further hope to alleviate that consternation, by pointing you, dear prophets, to the power of truth to overwhelm even that barrier.

I. Speaking the Truth Offends the Postmodern world

A. Tolerance as Virtue.

The Christian faith is highly invested in the concept of truth. Jesus came into the world "*full of grace and truth.*" (John 1:14)⁴ He characterizes His mission in terms of truth, "*I have come into the*

¹ http://Billingsgazette.com/news/state-and-regional/montana/methodist-pastor-marries-same-sex-couple-despite-church-doctrine/article_f5d33b25-7537-5edb-9a86-235a90c35f8b.html#ixzz3LRXDm5BK

² Ibid.

³ Esolen, Anthony. "Mission Nary Impossible." Touchstone, January/February, 2015. p. 25.

⁴ All Scripture Quotations from English Standard Version. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001.

world to bear witness to the truth." (John 18:37) Furthermore, Jesus promises His followers that they will know the truth and that the truth will set them free. (John 8:32) He begins to reveal the content of this truth when He calls Himself *"the way, the truth, and the life."* (John 14:6) Jesus promises that His followers will have help because, *"When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth."* (John 16:13) Finally, Jesus directs His followers as to where they will find truth when He prays on the night before His death, *"Thy Word is truth."* (John 17:17)

The Christian commitment to a concept of truth has had a profound impact on the surrounding culture. During the Christian era, science, literature, and art all functioned with some concept of truth. Over the centuries the impact of that concept has eroded. In recent years, what many call postmodern thought has chipped away at the idea of truth. "Both Christians and modernists believe in truth. Postmodernists do not."⁵

Some authors note a contrast between Postmodern and Enlightenment thought.

The Enlightenment project...took it as axiomatic that there was only one possible answer to any question. From this it followed that the world could be controlled and rationally ordered if we could only picture and represent it rightly. But this presumed that there existed a single correct mode of representation which, if we could uncover it (and this was what scientific and mathematical endeavours were all about), would provide the means to Enlightenment ends.⁶

Postmodern thought dismantles the Enlightenment devotion to a singular view representing the world, favoring instead a multi-faceted view of reality. However, the concept of truth is hard to kill so the attack has continued through the modern era. "...modernism has been identified with the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders, and the standardization of knowledge and production," while "fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or 'totalizing' discourses...are the hallmark of postmodern thought."⁷

As with most periods change, the first phase of the postmodern era is distinguished by a plea for toleration. America has endured a phase during which toleration has been touted as the premier virtue toward which its citizens should aspire. The fragmentation of its people into various "tribes" based on actual or "perceived" characteristics sends the mind reeling. In the arena of gender, for example, the clear God-given gifts of two, (male and female), has been expanded to anywhere from five, (LGBTQ), to a score or more. Each tribe, clamoring for its own version of reality, has demanded toleration for its facet of the truth, leaving those believing in an absolute truth to be branded as intolerant and bigoted.

During this phase the prophet of God might expect a voice in the market place as long as he was careful not to make any exclusive claims on truth. We have been counseled to preface our comments with the qualification, "I believe...," as if reference to our personal belief made room for everyone else's personal belief on equal footing. By this means prophets may have found a place at the table in the past, but it won't last.

B. Truth as Vice.

We are clearly in the second phase of the post-modern revolution. This is a period of time when the desire to maintain a concept of truth is seen as a weakness. The words of Allan Bloom in his 1987 work, The Closing of the American Mind, were prescient. "Openness used to be the virtue that permitted us to seek the good by using reason. It now means accepting everything and denying

⁵ Veith, Gene Edward. Postmodern Times. Crossway Books. Wheaton, Illinois. 1994. p. 20.

⁶ Harvey, David. The Condition of Postmodernity. Blackwell Publishers Inc. Malden, MA. 1989. 27.

⁷ Harvey. p. 9.

reason's power."⁸ His argument then was that in the halls of academia, the plea for toleration had been surpassed by the demand for a new order, one that denied the existence of truth. What once populated academia is now on the streets. In this truthless world the actions of Susan Otey make perfect sense. Her willingness to stare her vows in the face, and walk away unblinking is a bold proclamation that we are squarely in the era of untruth. The antithesis of truth, in terms of human actions, is not falsehood. In fact, quite the opposite holds. As long as we can speak of falsehood there must be an opposing truth to define it. The enemy of the prophet today is not falsehood, it is untruth. We have been untruthed. Asleep too long in our ivory chancels we have awakened to find a strange new world, where the majority of citizens no longer function with truth as a category of their minds.

As a result, those who cling to a concept of objective truth are viewed as creatures from another planet. This dependence on a "truth" is viewed as a weakness, a moral failure, characterized by a need to subject others to a dominant personal truth. In this world, any language about truth is seen as a vice, a ploy for power over others. Speaking of the graduates of our systems of higher education Gene Veith writes, "Many of them are coming out convinced that there is no objective meaning and that truth is nothing more than an act of power."⁹

That being said, humans cannot function without some criteria for making decisions. This is where being "untruthed" creates some friction with daily life. However, by its fragmentation to the individual level, postmodern thought has provided a convenient solution. "The intellect is replaced by the will. Reason is replaced by emotion. Morality is replaced by relativism. Reality itself becomes a social construct."¹⁰ (Emphasis added.) The action is subtle, but we have gradually become a nation governed by our feelings. This criterion has the added benefit of being unassailable to a reasoned argument. At least one generation has been convinced that "feelings are neither right, nor wrong, they just are." "But that's how I feel," is the indignant answer you may receive upon the attempt to convince someone that their feelings are based on faulty information, or have no basis in fact.

C. Two kinds of offense.

In this world, the prophet who presumes to speak an objective, even divine, truth will be sure to offend all his hearers. However, for the purpose of proposing a solution, let me delineate, what I think to be two distinct kinds of offense. On the one hand, sinners are offended when we are told the truth because we don't want to obey it. We don't feel that what we are doing is wrong. How can someone else judge us? No one else has the right to impose their version of reality on us. This kind of offense often garners headlines and generally wins the ballot of public opinion. In the recent debate over a non-discrimination ordinance in Billings, those who held for the old morality were called "haters" who wanted to scuttle the freedom of people to love whomever they felt like loving.

There is another, more subtle, and much more fragile offense. It may be helpful for prophets to acknowledge this type of offense. I am suggesting that sinners may be offended when they are told there is no truth. The offense is a result of the fact that God's law is written on their hearts. The truth of the law in a man's heart will create a subtle internal conflict when that heart hears that there is no truth. The good news is that this conflict plays out in the minds of those whose consciences have not been seared. They may even go so far as to realize that a world without truth will become extremely chaotic. The bad news is that consciences can be seared to the point that they agree that there is no truth. *"Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose*

⁸ Bloom, Allan. The Closing of the American Mind. Simon and Schuster. New York, 1987. p 38.

⁹ Veith. p 51

¹⁰ Veith. p. 29

consciences are seared..” (1 Timothy 4:1-2) If it is true that a vestige of the testimony of the law remains, those tasked with speaking the truth might be able to take advantage of it.

A Brief Excursus on the intent of art to offend.

There is an element of American societal structure that has attempted to bend, to its advantage, the human propensity to take offense. From earliest times human beings used symbols to represent the reality they dealt with every day. There are exceptions, but for the most part, from the time of cave dwellings through the period of the Renaissance, artists sought to reflect the truth of their observations of reality, through their art. By the late 19th century, artistic movements such as Impressionism, and Cubism gave up strict representations and began to aim at evoking feelings in the observer of the art. This trend has continued to this day. Now, under the influence of postmodern thought, many artists, eschewing the idea of truth, simply try to offend the audience as a means of breaking down claims of truth, and oppressive systems designed to deceive through the illusion of meaning. Wendell Berry, decrying the destruction of community, offers an interesting example of a 1989 play that came to Louisville, Kentucky. The author had confessed that he wrote the play for the purpose of offense.

My interest here is not in the quality or the point of Mr. Kopit’s play, which I did not see (because I do not willingly subject myself to offense). I am interested in the article about him and his play merely as an example of the conventionality of the artistic intention to offend—and the complacency of the public willingness not to be offended but passively to accept offense.

Here we see the famous playwright coming from the center of culture to a provincial city, declaring his intention to “offend almost everyone,” and here we see the local drama critic deferentially explaining the moral purpose of this intention.¹¹

The moral purpose, according to the author of the play, was to react to the apathy that is “corrupting American life.”¹² I find the intent to offend an interesting tactic. More to our point, is Mr. Berry’s assessment of the American public’s willingness to accept offense as a tactic. If this is true, the prophet may find solace in the precedent that the giving of offense is not without its effect.

D. An Application- Closed Communion

Wendell Berry’s concern that the postmodern mind will result in the disintegration of community ought to drive every Pastor consider the health of his congregation. A more specific application can be made to the Pastoral practice of closed communion. When the concept of truth has been eliminated there is no longer a basis for a public confession. That is, the postmodern mind can conceive of no totalizing discourse to which it ought to submit. It will only allow for the various perspectives of independent observations, or worse, transient feelings. The idea of making a public confession, based on the unchanging confession of a group of believers, does not make any sense. There is no such category in this mind.

When a visitor to your congregation comes calling, he will often appeal to his feelings of unity with all believers, as the basis for entrance to your table. If he were to plead that his private confession was that of your congregation, and you were to press him with regard to his contrary public confession as a member of another “denomination,” you would, doubtlessly, confuse him. He would most likely deny any commitment to a public confession, because no one call tell him what to believe. The fallout of the inability to conceive of an objective truth is everywhere.

II. Speaking the Truth is the Prophet’s Calling.

¹¹ Berry, Wendell. Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community. Pantheon Books. 1993. p. 154.

¹² Berry. Quoted by Berry. p. 154.

A. Speaking the Truth is the proclamation of the Gospel.

I speak unabashedly to prophets. You are men in the Office of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which Gospel is an eternal truth. I am not intent on positing a judgment as to whether the time of your exile is more difficult than that of any other prophet. I am intent on pointing out a key characteristic of the time in order that you may take advantage of it. The line between a world with truth and a world without truth is bottomless chasm. The longer we refuse to accept this reality the more precipitous our fall.

God has called you to speak the truth of the Gospel. Speaking to the Church at Ephesus Paul reminds the saints that the Gospel of Jesus is the absolute truth. *“In Him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit...”* (Ephesians 1:13) When closing his second letter to the congregation in Corinth he emphasizes his commitment to the truth. *“For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.”* (II Cor. 13:8)

Although in a different context, Paul’s proclamation of the truth also met resistance. So his manner of proclamation is still instructive for you. *“Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.”* (II Cor. 4:1-2) When faced with people who do not seem to understand, who are working without a concept of truth, it is tempting to lose heart. It is tempting to tamper with the truth when its proclamation may mean persecution.

It is a matter of fact that many within the Church have given up the open statement of truth in favor of more manipulative methods. Some even go so far as to say that insisting on the Scripture as the truth of God’s Word is an archaic form of Biblicism. Tampering with God’s Word in an attempt to wedge it into today’s understanding of the individual’s responsibility to construct reality is fair game for some. The prophet suffers persecution from within and from without.

So what are we to make of Paul’s confidence? What is stunning about this statement, especially from the postmodern perspective, is that his confidence is not founded in the method. He is not selling the three easy steps to truth telling. He is not giving us a process by which we will find success. Paul’s confidence is in the truth itself. Simply speak the truth, he says. There is no need to first convince the audience that such a thing as truth exists. Prophets simply speak the truth and let the truth do the work that it claims it can do.

This, in my view, is proper response to the postmodern deconstruction of truth. While the Evangelical world pumps out more books taking the rational approach, (e.g. [Evidence That Demands a Verdict](#)), etc., the Lutheran tactic is to depend on the power of the Word. Those who do not believe that truth exists are less susceptible to the rational approach. However, the creation of a new category of the mind is a Divine prerogative. Only God’s Word can do that.

B. Speaking the Truth Preserves the Physical World.

The true prophet does not accept the “untruthed” version of the postmodern world. He recognizes it as one more deception springing from the father of lies. When satan tires of attacking the truth itself, he is capable of attacking the concept. If he can convince us that truth is simply an unnecessary category of the mind he may have gained some ground.

But it is a dangerous surface for humanity. A world without a concept of truth devolves into chaos, and the tide of chaos is only stemmed by the strong man. This era was prefaced for us during the time of the judges. It was a time when *“...everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* (Judges 17:6) What God used to preserve the nation of Israel at that time was not the rule of law, but the power of the dictators, then known as judges.

This prospect looms on the horizon for our nation. It may be difficult to imagine, but your proclamation of the truth could result in the preservation of the physical life of your neighbor. There is evidence that our Heavenly Father uses the prophetic pronouncement of the truth for such a purpose. *“You are the salt of the earth...”* says Jesus. (The dominant function of salt at the time being the preservation of food.) *“My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you,”* says Solomon. (Proverbs 3:1-2) *“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you,”* says Moses. (Exodus 20:12)

Truth is a gift of God to His creation. An understanding of the concept of truth pays dividends, not only for the sake of spiritual life, but also in this life, as it assists the hearer to conform his life to the reality of God’s creation. Consequently, one reason the prophet speaks the truth is for the sake of his neighbor’s physical welfare. Truth facilitates order and peace. Falsehood facilitates chaos and destruction.

C. Speaking the Truth Frees its Hearers.

“What is truth?” As when these words were spoken during the trial of Jesus, so today these words could have various meanings. Was Jesus’ judge angry? Was he resigned, sarcastic, or interested? We cannot know Pilate’s attitude, but we can be assured that with regard to the existence of an absolute truth we will experience these reactions and more from our listeners. The prophet must be prepared for anger, resignation, sarcasm, interest, and a hundred other emotional responses.

The question, “What is truth,” is significant because it reminds us of likely responses today’s prophets will hear. But more important than the question is the statement that prompted it. Here Jesus summarizes His ministry in terms of truth. Jesus said to Pilate, *“For this purpose I was born, and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”* (John 18:37) In these words we have both gift and promise. Jesus has come into this world to bear the gift of truth. Since Jesus defines His purpose in this way, His prophets would do well to think of their service in the same way. You are called to bear witness to the truth. The promise of this text is overwhelming. Those who are of the truth will listen to the voice of Jesus. Of this you can be certain. However, since the prophet cannot know beforehand who are of the truth, he will speak the truth broadly and boldly. In speaking the truth of the Gospel the prophet can be confident that he is bearing the voice of Jesus into the world.

The voice of Jesus; it holds the key to freedom. Bound by sin, lost in error, untruthed to the point of death, there are countless souls who need to be set free. The postmodern world says that truth is a deception designed to keep people in bondage to those who have created the illusion of truth. On the contrary, the cruelest bondage is to the capricious task master masquerading as emotion. Jesus says that truth sets people free. *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* (John 8:31-32)

The office to which you have been called is not one of sterile rhetoric. Yours is no duty of family-oriented entertainment. The words that you speak make the difference between truth and falsehood, between freedom and bondage, between life and death. When you speak the truth of the Gospel of Jesus it sets people free from bondage. This is a high calling, so you dare not let the prospect of offense stand in the way. Prophets to a postmodern world trust the truth to overwhelm the offense.

Conclusion

Dear brothers, imagine how many Susan Oteys have listened to your proclamation of the truth. Carelessly carefree with regard to the truth, groping their way down the cold, dark hallway of life until they would have stumbled into the grave, they had been clueless that there was another whole world filled with grace and truth.

What if you offended them by pulling back the curtain on the obscenity of an absolute? What if they were disturbed by the thought that they might have been wrong? What if they responded with anger and sought to harm you? What if God created in their minds a category to which they had never been introduced? What if something miraculous came about through your offense? What ifs are the domain of the Divine, not yours. Whether or not they heard the truth in the voice of Jesus, you have fulfilled your calling. To bear witness to the truth; this is how God uses His prophets. This is how He uses you!

S.D.G.

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Quad and Dual Circuit Pastor's Conferences

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