

My wife often accuses me of believing that what I want to be true is what is or will be true. If I don't want it to rain, I'll act as if it is not going to rain. If I want to ride my bike, and if my riding the bike depends upon it not raining, then I will believe that it is not going to rain, maybe even if the weather forecaster has said, "It's going to rain." What I want to be true is what I think is or will be true. At least, this is my wife's evaluation of me. And, by the way, she doesn't always provide this evaluation with a great deal of approval. Sometimes this approach to life gets on her nerves. Sometimes life isn't what you want it to be. Sometimes what you want it to be ain't what it is. Sometimes it rains, even when you think it's not going to! And you get yourself into trouble.

The prophet Jeremiah today is dealing with a group of what he considers *false* prophets who keep telling the nation that it isn't going to rain. He says that these particular prophets are prophesying lies, saying, "I have dreamed! I have dreamed." And the dreams, Jeremiah is convinced, aren't dreams from God, but rather simple wishes of the dreamers. And God, according to Jeremiah, is aware of the lying. "Am I a God near by, and not a God far off?" asks the Lord. "Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?"

In other words, what you are up to can be seen, is known. You can't get away with this lying. You may be telling people what they want to hear, but what they want to hear isn't always the truth. And the truth will haunt you—you prophets and you listeners. The truth has this way of making itself known, in spite of all our lying.

I get it. Most of us want to hear what we want to hear. It isn't going to rain, Bill. But as the storm clouds are moving in and the

thunder is booming and the lightning is hitting the ground, we may want to come clean. We may want, as Jesus says, “to interpret the times.” It’s going to rain. Or for Jeremiah, the Babylonians are coming in, and they are going to bring havoc on our land.

The truth isn’t always pretty. You may not be able to ride your bike today, Bill. And you might get sopping wet, get struck by lightning, or fall off your bike, if you do. The truth may hurt, but eventually the truth will protect you. Telling us what we want to hear may make us feel good initially, but it isn’t going to help us in the long run.

We as a nation have some very ugly parts to our history. And some folks would rather not look at those ugly parts. They would rather deny them, rewrite them, so that what is told about us is more pleasant to our ears. I understand that. I don’t like to be reminded of some of the things I did or said early in my relationship with Bev. I am embarrassed by what was my know-it-all-ness and immaturity. But it doesn’t help to run from the truth.

I understand the need to run from the truth. I remember the mental gymnastics I went through years ago when I was confronted with the reality that I might have high blood pressure. I can’t have high blood pressure. I don’t use salt. I eat low fat. I exercise more than just about anybody. Must be whitecoat hypertension. Maybe it’s the sleeve that they put on the arm—it’s not big enough. I don’t like the numbers. Blame the number providers. But that didn’t help me. Only telling the truth helped me.

It doesn’t help for us as a nation to run from the truth of the racism that has been an integral part of our history. It doesn’t help for us as the Lutheran church not to admit that Martin Luther had

some real serious issues. Luther did and said some very bad things, some things that Hitler used in his crusade against the Jews. We can't be proud of that, nor can we deny that.

We'd like to whitewash the past and even the present. We'd like people to tell us what we want to hear. But that doesn't help. Lack of truth telling doesn't help. But sadly, sometimes we would prefer lies. Tickle our ears with words we want to hear.

There is much of modern Christianity that seems bent on telling people what they want to hear. Let's be honest. You tell people what they want to hear, and they will rally around you. Sometimes big churches and big money come from tickling the ears of people. You can be rich. You can always overcome. You can always be happy. You don't have to change the way you think about people, life, and politics. Love Jesus and everyone will like you, especially your family. We may want to hear all of that, but those who tell us that are feeding us lies.

This life of faith is not a matter of ease. It's hard stuff. That in part is what Hebrews is telling us today. In its listing of the heroes of faith, it points us to the horrific struggles that these heroes went through. They had to deal with lions, fire, and sword. Some were mocked, flogged, and imprisoned. Some wandered in deserts and mountains and found themselves in holes in the ground. Some were stoned to death. Others--and this is the most disturbing and confounding comment by Hebrews--were sawn in two. When that happened, we don't really know. But the point is clear. Being Christian isn't an easy thing.

And that is Jesus' point in our gospel lesson from Luke. Generally, Jesus is associated with peacemaking, and rightfully so.

When he was born, at least according to Luke's storytelling, the angels in the sky sang; "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to all the earth. Yet in *today's* reading, Jesus says that he didn't come to bring peace on the earth. He came to cast fire on the earth and to bring division. Woah! That is not helpful. That is not what we want to hear. Religious faith should make us one happy family.

No, Jesus says: "From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother." Come on, Jesus. Keeping families together is hard work no matter what. And now you are adding to the problem? Following you is going to bring additional burden to the family.

Now something you need to understand is that what Luke's Jesus describes is probably what happened in the early church. This, more than likely, is after-the-fact writing. Luke was probably written about 85 ACE, long after the destruction of the temple by Rome in 70 ACE. During this time, families were often split up because of the choice of some of their members to join the Jesus' movement.

In a religious culture like ours, where faith in Jesus is often defined as having a personal relationship with him, as welcoming him into your heart so that you can go to heaven when you die, we don't get why the early Christians got in trouble. For them, it wasn't about choosing Jesus at a crusade. It was about new priorities, a new community that probably reduced the significance of the biological family. It was about hanging out with the folks with whom Jesus hung out—the forgotten, neglected and powerless ones. And

most of all, and this is what got them into big trouble, it was about not bowing down at the feet of the emperor, the strong man who demanded their worship. The early church wouldn't worship the emperor; they wouldn't agree with everything that the emperor thought and taught. They said, giving the church its first creed, "*Jesus is Lord*," which meant that Caesar wasn't. This is what got them into the most trouble. Caesar and all his minions were threatened by the folks who wouldn't play his games.

I know you don't always want to hear this. But being a Christian isn't always easy. We operate out of a different value system. We pay attention to the people who are often neglected. We aren't into power games, contrary to what our practice of the faith has often indicated throughout our history. Our ultimate loyalty is not to any political leader or political party. For us, Jesus rules. His reign is what life is all about. And his reign is about love, grace, and forgiveness.

We, therefore, won't bow down to systems that suggest that money runs the show, that the past determines the future, that human worth is dependent upon accomplishment or achievement, that life is earned, rather than received, that hospitality is provided only to those who can give it in return. It's a new world in Jesus Christ, and some folks don't like that world. They and we can be threatened by it. It can unsettle just about everything we have ever been taught about life. But trust me. What we don't want to hear is often what we need to hear. Sometimes we just need to sit with the tough stuff. But know this. Love is driving this bus. Love is the unsettling word. Love is what brings us the truth. And the truth, while hard to hear, will ultimately set us free.