

A Credible Witness?

To begin today's sermon, I want to begin by returning to a question I posed at the end of last week's message: Why is it that the world-changing story of Jesus' death and resurrection seems to have lost its audience—at least in our part of the world?

As Pastor Olsen reminded us in his reflections on Maundy Thursday, we live in an environment that philosophers call postmodern, and that political pundits are now calling "post-truth." One thread that runs from the high-minded discourse of the ivory tower to the depths of cable news is the idea that truth is all a matter of one's perspective, and that one's perspective has everything to do with self-interest.

People are skeptical of what politicians say because we've seen too many of them manipulate and distort the facts, and even just plain lie, in their quest to obtain and hold onto power. Although this seems to be reaching unprecedented depths these days—we've always more or less expected that of politicians. But now this skepticism has crossed over into the one arena our modern world has taught us is the last bastion of objective truth—science.

We see this played out in the controversy surrounding climate change. On the one hand we have climate change deniers, who don't try to challenge the data that climate scientists gather as much as they try to attack the

scientists who interpret it. They claim that these scientists have created sort of a climate change industry. And in this system they have a vested interest in manipulating the data to fit their preconceived ideas, because their research grants and careers depend on it. And the counter-charge is that the deniers of climate change are sponsored by powerful people in the fossil fuel industry, who have their own vested interests in manipulating the data and suppressing the facts.

A common thread here is that people no longer trust the messages of political leaders and scientists because they no longer trust the messengers—and they've come to accept that that's just the way it is. We could say something similar about the church. In all honesty, the church has done things to deserve this, including the highly publicized misconduct of leaders in some parts of the church, and our mirroring of the divisions of race and class that plague our society. But we've also been swept up in the wider trend to distrust anyone who says that they have a message to share.

I'm sure that this isn't the only reason why the gospel seems to have lost its audience these days, but it's certainly part of the picture. So how do we become credible witnesses to the good news in this postmodern, post-truth, post-Christian world? Our credibility begins with our character, with way we conduct ourselves in the world, beginning with our closest relationships. In youth ministry circles—at least back in the day—they used to call this “earning the right to be heard.”

Our vehicle for pondering this together will be Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. Second Corinthians isn't a very popular book. It has several memorable passages and quotable quotes, but it's not a book that readers read or preachers even preach straight through. I've never really done it my almost 27 years of preaching practically every Sunday. It's a complex book—it's very popular among modern scholars to argue that it's not really a single, coherent letter, but is cobbled together from fragments of at least two different letters Paul wrote. But no matter how we solve that, it's just difficult to read. Paul's sentences can get long and complicated—it's actually some of the hardest Greek to translate in the entire New Testament. And besides that, there's a lot going on behind the scenes that we can only guess at—because as I often say—Paul's letters were actual letters to real churches and reading them is literally a case of reading someone else's mail.

Even though we can only tease out parts of it from the clues in his two letters, we know that Paul had a long and complicated relationship with the Christians in Corinth. It goes something like this: According the book of Acts, Paul founded the church in Corinth and stayed there for about a year and half, so he had more than a passing acquaintance with them from the beginning. That relationship became more difficult after he wrote the letter we know as First Corinthians. You may remember that in First Corinthians, Paul takes the church to task from a number of things—including factions and divisions among the members, blatant sexual immorality, members suing each other in the civil

courts, disorder in their worship. And it seems likely that sometime after he sent that letter he made what scholars often call his “painful visit” to Corinth, and at the end of that visit they didn’t part on good terms. As this letter opens his relationship with the church is on very rocky ground—and after some time away he’s trying to put it back together again.

From what we can tease out from the reading, the first thing Paul has to overcome is that he had promised that he was going to come and visit them again, but then he didn’t show up. Now if his relationship with them had been in a better place this might have been a minor bump in the road—but now it was just more ammunition for the people in the church who were rejecting his leadership. To them it was one more sign that Paul couldn’t be trusted or believed—for them his credibility was shot.

What do we lose when we lose our credibility? At its heart it’s a loss of trust. If our word is not really our word, if we don’t mean what we say, what foundation do we have for a relationship with another person? If I share information with someone and they find out that that information is false, or if I promise to do something and then don’t follow through, how do I come back from that? At best they will think I’m unreliable. At worst they’ll think I’m a liar. As a leader, if people think I’m not trustworthy, or that I’m only looking out for myself, how can I have the difficult conversations that a leader needs to have sometimes? How can any of us have those difficult conversations with the people in our lives if we’re not trusted?

And so how does Paul try to regain his credibility? He makes his appeal to them based on what they ought to know about his character. He says in verse 12, “Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace.”

We should take a moment to unpack a few things here. When Paul says “this is our boast”—he’s not using that word in an arrogant way. He might have said, “I am confident of this, that after carefully examining my conscience before God, I’m confident that I have always conducted myself with you with integrity and godly sincerity.” He hasn’t relied on “worldly wisdom”—the Greek says—he hasn’t acted “according to the flesh.” He has never been one to try to stay in people’s good graces by telling them what he thinks they want to hear.

He says that keeping his word is part of his character. And then as he often does, Paul throws in an important theological nugget. Keeping his word is also an essential ingredient of God's character, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.” On the surface, this is wonderful and glorious. But it’s also easier for Paul and us to see in this hindsight than it was for the people of Israel to see as they struggled through centuries when it didn’t seem like God was doing anything. But all that waiting and trusting was vindicated when Jesus came. Because we trust God to keep his word, we also trust that when he seems to be delaying he must have his reasons.

And that's where Paul goes next. He says that if they really knew him and understood him and let his character speak for itself, they would realize that he had his reasons for changing his plans. And he spells these out as chapter one spills over into chapter two. He didn't come to Corinth because he wanted to spare everyone the pain of another painful visit. As he considered it and prayed about it, he realized that the time wasn't right yet—that coming right then probably would have made things worse—and so he decided to write this letter to lay the groundwork to restore his relationship with them. He did it knowing that it would put his credibility in question, but he trusted that they would understand in the long run.

It might be fair to say that Paul didn't deserve the distrust of the Corinthians, but that happens to everyone sometimes. But more often we lose our credibility because we've done things to put ourselves in that position. And once we lose it, fairly or not, rebuilding it is a long and difficult road. One writer—a New Testament scholar of all people—summarizes it this way:

Consistency of conduct is the foundation of trust in human relations. Friendship can go nowhere if there is not confidence that the other person can be counted on regularly and completely. That trust is built one brick at a time. The structure we build by our day-in/day-out dependability is the house we live in and into which we invite our friends. When it comes to building or destroying trust, there are no little failures of dependability, no little slights of each other. All our peccadillos corrode trust. Failing to take the trash out as promised may not seem like such a big thing, but it subtly raises the question of what all our promises mean. (J. Paul Sampley, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*)

This is true of all of our relationships. But to come full circle to where we began, the message we share about Jesus is a challenging one. The story of

Jesus' resurrection challenges our ordinary conceptions of what it's possible even for God to do. The way of life Jesus calls us to is at odds with the values of the culture around us. So our ability to ask people to listen to the good news of the life God offers in Jesus Christ depends on our credibility, and that is rooted in our character. We need to earn that right to be heard.

Why should the people we see every day—co-workers and neighbors and especially our families—trust anything we might have to say about Jesus, if they can't trust what we have to say about taking out the trash? To be credible witnesses our characters must mirror the character of Jesus.

Are you—am I—a credible witness?

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