

THE BIG “T” AND THE LITTLE “t”**JOHN 4:15-24**

I want you to think with me today about what it means to be authentic, genuine, and real with God Himself. There’s a whole lot of products out there designed to imitate the real thing. There’s plastic decking that looks like real wood. Vinyl flooring that appears to be ceramic tile. But have you heard about Spray-on Mud? Spray-on Mud is designed for use on the outside of your SUV. That way it appears you use your expensive gas-guzzler for more than taking the kids to soccer practice. Spray it on and friends might think you’ve just returned from a wilderness adventure. Sales of the product are going well, particularly in America, and in London where the concept originated. "If they want an authentic look," says the inventor, "There's not a lot else they can do. There's not a lot of mud in London." Apparently, \$15 a can seems a reasonable price for the appearance of authenticity. There are many expressions of Christianity that we can try to pass off as the real thing. Good wishes can be mistaken for prayer. Inspirational bumper stickers and symbols can be seen as evangelism. Excellent music can cover for authentic worship from the heart. Christian clichés can be handed out as biblical wisdom. An attractive personality can be mistaken for a Spirit-filled life. What does it mean to be authentic and genuine with God?

There’s a well-known story about Jesus in that regard found in John 4. Jesus had an interesting conversation with a woman beside a well where people came to draw water for their daily needs. She was a woman with a past – a past broken by a whole lot that had gone wrong. Let me read just a portion of the dialogue between Jesus and this woman with you today. I invite you to drill down with me on what Jesus said to this woman in v. 23-24 (NLT). “But the time is coming—indeed it’s here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.”

What did Jesus mean? Worshiping God in spirit could mean several things. It could be a reference to the Holy Spirit. After all, true worship only occurs when the Holy Spirit enters into your human spirit and mine. Or maybe Jesus meant “spirit” in the sense of what’s going on inside of you internally when you approach God – in your human spirit, so to speak. My best guess is that Jesus was saying His Father seeks human beings who will worship Him from the heart, from the deep, internal stuff of who we are, and in or through the presence of the Holy Spirit who lives in His children.

Jesus also said His Father seeks people who worship Him in truth. Does that mean people who believe all the right or true things about God? I don’t think so. Does it mean only people who are always honest and have integrity, in other words, truthful people? I don’t think so. The kind of truth Jesus was referring to here is simply being authentic and genuine before God. The Bible says about God, “Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being....” (Ps. 51:6 ESV) That psalm was written by King David. It was David’s poetic expression of deep repentance before God. He had done some terrible stuff. He’d taken another man’s wife, Bathsheba, and gotten her pregnant. Then, he had

arranged for this man – a high-ranking soldier named Uriah – to get killed conveniently in a battle. It was as much murder as if David had committed the crime himself.

David pretended it didn't happen. For an entire year he lived in denial. Perhaps he thought God would just overlook it or forget about it. After all, he was the king of Israel at the time. Back then most kings did whatever they wanted. But then a prophet named Nathan boldly challenged David right to his face and David had to face the horror of what he'd done. Truth in his inward being was certainly not about having integrity because David didn't have any. Nor was truth in his inward being thinking right, true things about God. No, truth in his inward being meant David admitted he was completely in the wrong in every way. Truth was facing the evil darkness of what He'd done in the light of God's grace. Truth required allowing God to expose the awfulness of his sin and refusing to deny it any longer. Truth was admitting he had a deadly, spiritual cancer growing in him that only God could cure.

When David did that, I'm convinced real worship happened. One result was Psalm 51. I believe that's what Jesus meant by worshiping His Father in spirit and in truth. David brought his little "t" - the truth about himself as miserable as it was – into the light of God's big "T" truth. That's when authentic worship happened. God is Truth with a great, big, capital T. He is absolute truth, total truth, perfect truth, eternal truth. Our truth – our little "t" truth – isn't about our honesty or integrity. Instead, it's the truth about who we are: the many ways we've done what God hates or failed to do what God loves. It's also about our pain, our brokenness, our doubts about God, and the bad things people have done to us. All of that is part of our truth, too. My little "t" truth is my being honest, authentic, and real before God – the big "T" - about who I am. When that happens, worship happens. That was David's experience. That was also the experience of the woman in John 4. She wanted to hide her past from Jesus. She wasn't proud of having had five husbands. Nor was she pleased that the man she lived with now wasn't even officially number six. But Jesus gently nudged her toward honesty, authenticity, and being real before God. Why? Because it's essential if we want to truly connect with God in any meaningful way. A relationship with Him begins and continues when my little "t" is brought into the light of His big "T."

So, today we've gathered here to worship God in this place. And in few minutes we're going to partake of Communion – the Lord's Supper. But here's a simple fact. Only some of us will actually worship God today and connect with Him. Jesus said His Father seeks people who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. That can only happen this morning if you and I are willing to take our little "t" truth – the truth about who we are and what's going on inside of us today – and place it before God's big "T" truth. You might think, "OK, that's easy to do." No, it isn't. It's often very hard to do, because honesty and authenticity don't come naturally to any of us. We need the help of the Holy Spirit inside of us encouraging us to open our spirits honestly before our Heavenly Father. When it comes to worshiping God – be it a Sunday service, partaking of the Lord's Supper, in the privacy of our homes, or in the car on the way to work – we can walk down one of three paths. Here's the first path of two we need to avoid.

AVOID THE PATH OF DENIAL.

There's an ad on TV currently that I think is pretty effective. It's about living in Denial, Ohio. It's about the opioid crisis in our state and how there's a very human tendency to believe that opioid abuse or addiction couldn't possibly touch your life or mine. Denial comes all too easily for most of us. Some people are in denial about the impact of not getting enough sleep. So you didn't get enough sleep last night? No big deal, you say. Well, actually, it is a big deal. Sleep deprivation can have severe short-term and long-term consequences. According to one scientific study, sleep-deprived people can act as dumb as someone that's drunk. Cognitive tests showed that people who'd only gotten six hours of sleep a night over 14 days showed similar reaction time as people whose blood alcohol content was at 0.1 percent—in other words, legally drunk people. But most Americans who suffer from chronic sleep deprivation don't know it and therefore won't admit it. After a long period of sleep deprivation, you stop realizing how tired you are. It's another form of denial.

Denial happens spiritually, too. Often we like to deny how sin shows up in our lives. That's what David did for a whole year. That's what the woman in John 4 tried to do with Jesus. We like to excuse, rationalize, or minimize our sin. We like to believe our sin is not as bad in God's sight as the sins of others. Denial. Whenever you and I deny our sin or deny how unacceptable it is to an absolutely holy, perfect God, we fail to bring the truth about ourselves – the little “t” – into the light of God's big “T” truth. That makes a relationship with God difficult.

Denial shows up in other ways, too. Frequently we can deny the immense pain that the sins of other people have inflicted upon us. The reality is that our parents were imperfect people and sometimes behaved in ways toward us that has left lasting pain. The reality is that sometimes prodigal sons and daughters have left a parent's heart deeply bruised. The reality is that abuse causes devastation. The reality is that when a spouse or a close friend has broken our trust, it leaves the soul with an open wound. We often deny the pain caused by the heartaches of life. The reality is that a miscarriage results in profound grief. The reality is that a diagnosis of a terminal disease is immensely frightening. The reality is that losing a job is an invitation to deep anxiety. The fact is that there's a whole lot in this old world we'd just rather avoid.

Then, when we come here on a Sunday to the service or we get ready to partake of the bread and the cup, we can drift into denial. I'll bury the guilt. I'll deny the fear. I'll ignore the grief. I'll put on my happy face. I'll rejoice anyway. But denial of our true feelings before God is a failure to bring the truth about ourselves – the little “t” – into the light of God's big “T.” When you walk down the path of denial, you don't truly relate to God or truly connect with Him. And you fail, then, to worship Him in spirit or in truth. Here's a second path to avoid if at all possible.

AVOID THE PATH OF DESPAIR.

Once walking through the twisted little streets of Hong Kong, the late Norman Vincent Peale – a well-known pastor - came upon a tattoo parlor. In the window were displayed samples of the tattoos available. He saw the familiar options - an anchor, a flag, a mermaid, or whatever. But what really got his attention were three words that could be tattooed on someone's body: "Born to lose." Peale entered the shop in astonishment and, pointing to those words, asked the Chinese tattoo artist, "Does anyone ever put that tattoo – 'Born to lose' - on his body?" He replied, "Yes, sometimes." Peale was dumbfounded. "But, I just can't believe that anyone in his right mind would do that." The Chinese man simply tapped his forehead and said in broken English, "Before tattoo on body, tattoo on mind."

Despair is a more dangerous path than denial. This is when we look at our lives and we just decide to give up. We're too sinful, too broken, too messed up. God couldn't possibly love us or save us. When Jesus died on the cross, His sacrifice might take away the sins of others, but not my sins. Or, when it comes to the inevitable heartaches of life, the path of despair refuses to acknowledge that God might be big enough to bring something good out of something bad. Despair insists on leaving God out of the picture entirely. Some people just want to stay stuck in how unfair life appears to be and remain sad or angry about it forever. Born to lose. That's the outlook of despair.

This is not denial, to be sure. There's no glossing over our problems. But there's also no hope and no faith in God. We refuse to believe God can forgive our sins or forgive those who have sinned against us. We dismiss the possibility that God can redeem our pain and bring good out of it. We take our eyes off Jesus. We stop reading the Bible. We stop praying. We shrug off the encouragement Christian friends try to send our way. The problem with that kind of despair is that it isn't accurate. God is still great. God is still good. God still offers us His love and grace. So, if you walk down the path of despair, your little "t" truth will not match up with God's big "T" truth. You won't relate to God, and you won't connect with God. And you certainly won't worship Him in spirit and in truth. Let me suggest yet another path you can take and you should take.

TAKE THE PATH OF DIRECTNESS.

When it comes to our own sin – all the ways we've done what God hates and failed to do what God loves – you don't have to deny it or despair over it. You can bring it to Jesus directly. You hear directness when David said to God, "For I recognize my rebellion; it haunts me day and night. Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight." (Ps. 51:3-4 NLT) You see more than hear directness in how the woman in John 4 responded to Jesus. When Jesus was very direct with her about her past, she didn't deny it or run away. Sometimes getting on the path of directness is just allowing Jesus to be direct with us. At the end of the story, she ran and told her friends about Jesus, "He told me everything I ever did!" (Jo. 4:39 NLT)

Directness comes before our Heavenly Father saying, "Here it is, Lord. Here's my lying, my gossip, my lust, my love of money, my racism, my bitterness, my critical, vicious

tongue. Here's that improper relationship, that anger, that hatred. I confess it before You. I renounce it in the name of Jesus. I ask that Jesus' shed blood cover my sin and remove it from my life. I ask the Holy Spirit give me the strength to turn from it and not return to it." Confession is bringing the truth about ourselves – the little "t" – into the light of the truth about God – the big "T." If you do that today, you will relate to God and connect with God. You will most definitely worship Him in spirit and in truth.

When it comes to life's heartaches, be direct with your Heavenly Father. We don't have to deny our pain or live in despair either. God understands feeling so angry it's hard to see straight. God understands feeling so violated you don't know if you can continue on. God understands feeling so broken and sad that we wonder if we will ever be whole again. And it's OK to feel that way in this room and before this Table. Worshiping God doesn't mean suppressing our hurt, but instead bringing it before Jesus directly.

Tell the Lord how you feel today. He can handle your disappointment, your questions, and even your anger. Cry out to Him. Be direct. If you do that, it's less likely you will walk down the path of either denial or despair. When we pour out our frustration and hurt to God, He meets us right there. He begins to empower us and give us a new peace. As we release all of that inner turmoil to Him, He begins to provide insight and healing. No, not all at once, so keep on being direct with Him. As we do that, God is faithful to remind us He is still God. We still matter to Him. He still loves us. There is still hope. The Bible and its promises are still true. It's the eventual result of bringing the little "t" – the truth about me – before the big "T" – the truth about God. As we do that, we relate to and connect with God. And we worship Him in spirit and in truth,

Paul, the great Christian leader, was able to very direct with God despite some monumental obstacles he endured in his life and ministry for Jesus. "We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies." (2 Cor. 4:8-10 NLT) You don't hear denial. You don't hear despair. What you do hear is directness.

I read about a pastor this week who moved from Minnesota to Long Island. In his new church he met a Jewish follower of Jesus who constantly challenged him to view the Bible through Jewish eyes. David was a passionate, brilliant, full-blooded New York Jew. For the first two years of this pastor's ministry, David would often approach him after a worship service and say something like, "Hey, nice sermon, I liked that third point a lot, but I think you also missed something crucial in that passage. Let me tell you how I would see this through Jewish eyes." And then he'd launch into his weekly five-minute rebuttal about how best to interpret the Bible. The pastor thought David was trying to pick a fight with him, but he politely listened and thanked him for his "insights."

But after listening to these weekly rebuttals for two years (Minnesotans, I've heard somewhere, are notoriously nice and longsuffering), this pastor just couldn't stand it anymore. So he finally blurted out, "David, what is the deal with you? Don't you get

anything out of my sermons? Doesn't God tell you something? Why must you always nitpick about some minor point of theology?" The pastor's face flushed with anger and David stood there frozen in shock.

Finally, David broke the icy silence. First, he laughed. Then he said, "Maybe I should explain my cultural background, which is probably different than yours. When New York Jews like me argue about Scripture, we're asking for a dialogue. When I tell you that I disagree with something you've said, I'm expecting you to fire back and say, 'O, yeah, well I think that you're wrong, too, and let me tell you why.' You see, Jewish people sometimes get close to each other by working through unpleasant feelings, even by arguing if necessary. Confronting each other is a positive sign of intimacy in the relationship. So when I dish it out, I want you to dish it right back. That's how trust and intimacy grows in the relationship." Interesting, huh? Have you ever thought you might be able to achieve trust and intimacy with God through intense dialogue with Him – even having a rousing argument? God can handle your complete honesty. God can handle you being direct. He certainly prefers it to either denial or despair.

Every time we have the privilege of coming to the Lord's Table, our Heavenly Father invites us to be direct with Him about our sin and whatever kind of pain we might be experiencing in our lives. When we practice denial or despair in our relationship with God, it's like slapping Him in the face. Be direct. Honest. Authentic. Genuine. Speaking of "t's," here's another way to think about it. Communion – partaking of the Lord's Supper - is when my little "t" – the truth about myself today – is brought into the presence of the big "T" – God's never changing truth – by yet another "t." It's the "t" of the cross itself. It's Jesus' death and resurrection that makes it possible for the little "t" and the big "T" to come together. That's how, when, and where we relate to and connect with God. The cross. That's when worship happens. Here Jesus' words once again before you come to the Table. "But the time is coming—indeed it's here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." (Jo. 4:23-24 NLT)