



“NO MORE LIES”

SCRIPTURE: HOSEA 11: 1-11; COLOSSIANS 3: 1-11
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

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Hosea 11:1-11

11:1 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

11:2 The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

11:3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them.

11:4 I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.

11:5 They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me.

11:6 The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes.

11:7 My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

11:8 How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

11:9 I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

11:10 They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west.

11:11 They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Colossians 3:1-11

3:1 So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

3:2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,

3:3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

3:4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

3:5 Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).

3:6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.

3:7 These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.

3:8 But now you must get rid of all such things--anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.

3:9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices

3:10 and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.

3:11 In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Elder Arnold Cunningham had a bad habit.

“I lie a lot,” Elder Cunningham tells Elder Price—right as the young Mormon men were set to leave on their two years in mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Cunningham’s Dad said, “He-- He just sometimes MAKES THINGS UP when he doesn't know what to say.”

Elder Cunningham says, “Bishop Donahue says it's because I have no self esteem and desperately want to fit in with my peers!” Elder Donahue turned out to be a lie, too.

For Arnold Cunningham lying was a way of life—he seems at the beginning to be a jester like character in the Broadway play the Book of Mormon, but he becomes the carrier for a biting satire of all religious belief, not just what Mormon’s believe, but what all of us religious types believe.

Elder Cunningham’s lies in the play meld together with all sorts of lies that have defined the nature of religious belief through time.

In the end, how can we possibly know what to believe—especially when so much of what it means to believe seems far from believable in a world as harsh and cruel as ours can be?

If you’ve seen the play, then you know how sharp and raw its ridicule is of religious belief. If you haven’t seen the play, suffice it to say it pulls no punches when it comes to being religious.

The Apostle Paul had never been the Colossae (kolosi). He knew that church from afar.

And they, of course, knew him—a teacher, a leader, a church planter, a doctrinal clarifier.

Before the church had even given birth to orthodoxy, before the church had bishops and presbyters and tribunals and scriptures of its own to parse and to quarrel about—before all of that, Paul was theologian and tribunal at large—reaching out to churches all over the ancient Mediterranean region with sometimes gentle and sometimes not so gentle correction about their ways of following Jesus.

This letter to the Colossian church doesn’t have the personal ring to it that many of Paul’s other letters have—there is, at times, almost a detached tone to it. He lays out his argument in response to a crisis he has heard about—a crisis of understanding, a crisis of belief.

Scholarship suggests Paul wrote this letter from prison. Paul knew the price of belief—and he was determined to stay the course.

This letter is defensive—an apologetics of sorts—calling the church in Colossae to task for losing track of the power and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.” (Colossians 3: 9-10)

You see the crisis in Colossae came down to Jesus—and how much people there in that church trusted the power of what Jesus accomplished.

Colossae was a diverse and dynamic city—with practitioners of many different faiths living in proximity to each other. The letter makes reference to some of the worldviews that Paul feared the church there was getting tangled up with.

In Colossae there were Jesus followers who were also following some of the practices of other belief systems—some that told them they had to deny themselves of food and engage in extreme asceticism, some that told them that their lives were nothing more than pawns in a game of fate written in the stars, some that told them Jesus’ humanity was only a façade—that God only appeared or seemed to become human.

These competing claims and systems of belief were leading Jesus followers in Colossae to go back to old habits, old ways of putting their trust in what Paul says are human constructs like extreme fasting, or reading the stars for what the future holds, or thinking the promises of Jesus were only for a select few.

Paul says no more lies—Jesus following is about freedom—about liberation from the oppression of hating the world, or hating how we are made, or hating other people who don’t look like us or eat like us or come from the same place as us.

Hosea’s prophetic words are really about believing that God is not wrathful or out to destroy us for our wayward ways—but that God loves us with the gentleness and fidelity of a parent.

We refuse to come back to God even as God leads us with “bands of kindness, with cords of love.”

Our wayward ways kindle compassion in God, not wrath—Hosea’s words call us to trust, to believe in a love that will not let us go—even when we refuse to believe. The lies we tell ourselves and each other don’t destroy God’s love—they diminish our lives.

And that is exactly what Paul’s letter wants the anxious church of Colossae to remember—following Jesus is life-enhancing—and if you are not experiencing the life-giving freedom that comes from following Jesus, then you are missing the point, you are living a lie.

Where did the church get off track with the nature of belief? Where did belief get confused with certainty, with conformity, or with closing ranks?

In the Book of Mormon Elder Cunningham is faced with a dilemma—people in crisis are looking to him for answers, for guidance, for relief from suffering, and the truth is he’s never even read the Book of Mormon—the Book he’s been dispatched to tell people in Ghana about—the Book he’s supposed to tell them can change their lives.

So when push comes to shove, he lies—he makes up stories about what it says in the book to respond to the very real pain of their lives.

The absurdity of it all is pretty hard hitting—it forces any believer to take a disturbing look at what we believe and why we believe it.

Do we believe because we are supposed to?

Do we believe because we think, in the end, that belief will get us everything we want?

Do we believe because we are afraid of what might happen if we don’t—like going to Mormon hell—depicted in the play with the same absurdity and raunchiness that defines the rest of the story?

Or do we believe because we are willing to stake our lives on the possibility that the world can be healed, that the world really can be redeemed?

What do you believe? Why do you believe it? How does what you believe translate into your way of life in a world as cruel as ours can be?

How do our beliefs give us a way forward in the face of another mass shooting—this time in a Wal-Mart crowded with over 3000 people on a back to school shopping day in El Paso, TX by a white man who wanted to kill immigrants? And then just several hours later another white man opens fire in a popular entertainment district in Dayton, Ohio. How do our beliefs empower us to respond to this horrendous sickness in our culture with more than thoughts and prayers?

How do our beliefs interrupt systems of oppression and violence toward black and brown bodies, toward indigenous bodies and immigrant bodies, toward female bodies, differently-abled bodies, LGBTQ bodies, toward impoverished bodies?

How do our beliefs meet people in the pain of addiction, broken relationship, mental illness, cancer, chronic pain, isolation, despair, or loneliness?

How do our beliefs make meaning and bring healing in this broken world?

Answers can be hard to come by. Sometimes, all I can do is go outside and look up at the night sky.

The stars don't lie. You look up and you remember once again how expansive and infinite the world is. The stars remind us we are small, and that we are a part of big story of which we only know a tiny part.

People have asked the stars through the ages to give us answers, to show us the way, to make meaning out of mystery. We may scoff at turning to the stars for answers, but think about it... the faith tradition that we say defines us began with a story about a wild star—calling wise people and working people and desperate people and people just trying to stand up and be counted—all of us were invited by that star into a new direction for how to live life on this planet.

The story that defines us began with a strange dream and an unlikely healing opportunity somehow written in those stars.

It's a crazy story really—a baby born in a barn that would save the world, a wandering teacher who spoke truth to power and crossed social boundaries and healed our brokenness ends up executed, life out of death, God amongst humans, compassion in the face of cruelty. This is a story not strong on plausibility.

But it is a story that excels at possibility.

The faith that we say defines us begins with believing in a God who is not far away in the heavens, but who walked in our shoes—a God who finds a way to make and keep life in a world as seemingly God-forsaken as our world can feel sometimes.

The truth is, belief really is a choice you and I make every day—and it can't come down to doctrines and creeds and the church we call home.

The choice we make everyday to believe is about you and me deciding to stop with the lies—the lies that say we don't need the universe to be defined by love, the lies that say the way we treat each other doesn't matter, the lies that tell us to just put our heads down and ignore the world's pain, the lies that tell us that accumulating more things will make us worthy, the lies that tell us we need to be numb to it all to get through—all those lies that tell us there is no God, there is no purpose, there is no greater meaning that lays claim to our lives.

Those are the lies we choose to stop telling ourselves and each other when we choose to believe in a God who loves us so much that proximity to our suffering is what God chooses every day.

This is the truth that awaits us at the Table Christ prepares for us—the Table that tells us the truth about who we really are—we are children of a living, breathing, healing, redeeming God.

The Table feeds us with the truth of enough in a world of greed.

The Table feeds us with the truth of welcome in a world that builds walls.

The Table feeds us with the truth of Christ's freedom in a world of mass incarceration.

This Table helps us to taste and see that God's love is changing the world even now—even here, today when you and I decide to stop lying and to keep trying to follow Jesus toward a better world.

Thanks be to God.