

Capital T: Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

by [G. Kevin Baker](#) in the [July 11, 2006](#) issue

The other day I was sitting in a coffee shop and couldn't help overhearing an interesting and intense debate on the other side of the room. An older gentleman was trying his best to aid an inquisitive college student who had some hard-hitting questions. She asked about scripture, about authority and about the church. One question kept popping up: "What is the difference between truth for you, truth for me and truth with a capital T?"

I have encountered the question in my own ministry and I find it to be distracting and unhelpful, in part because it assumes that individual judgment trumps a community of people committed to truth-telling. We too often become enamored with trying to identify abstract propositions of faith and forget that truth is first and foremost about not lying.

Why are we not more preoccupied with questions that explore this reality, such as: What would happen if I quit lying to my spouse? Why do I avoid the truth about myself, my weaknesses and my hidden faults? Is it possible to succeed in the workplace without lies or half-truths? When I do lie, what do I gain and what do I lose?

Such questions are troubling because they explode theoretical categories of subjective and objective truth, thrusting us into the distressing incandescence of honesty—leaving us vulnerable, needy and exposed. I would much prefer to haggle over scriptural authority or the divinity of Jesus than be confronted with my own ugliness, sin and self-constructed falsehoods. Given a choice between accountability to a community of truth-tellers and my own version of truth, I am regularly tempted to opt for the latter. Until, that is, I remember that as a baptized member of the body of Christ I have sisters and brothers who will drag me toward the light even when I resist—sisters and brothers who will remind me that I have died to the old lies and have put on Christ.

No one knows more about truth-telling as a mark of the baptized than John the Baptist, who devoted his ministry to speaking truth to sinners and calling them to

repentance. Seekers from all over the “Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem” went out to meet him in the desert, not because of his great theological acumen and insight, but because of his uncompromising veracity (Mark 1:5). They traveled to this locust-eating, camel-hair-wearing prophet not because he knew the difference between lowercase and uppercase truth, but because they recognized the truth in his words. John had the rare ability and willingness to “cut to the chase” and give people the “straight dope.” He was willing to say things others are afraid to say—to proclaim that things are not right with the world or with us. His candor may sound harsh and politically incorrect to us in our contemporary setting, but like a skilled surgeon’s hands, it still excises cancerous fictions, lies that sicken us unto death.

But what are the consequences of speaking the truth? That may be the more relevant question for seekers of truth and would-be disciples. A conversation over coffee with the Baptizer might reveal a disturbing reality: truth-telling often leads to suffering and sometimes to death. This holy habit of speaking and receiving truth is one of cross-bearing and costly discipleship. It’s a narrow path, one that few dare to trod, for speaking truth is not always popular, especially when it is spoken to power. The prophet Nathan learned this. Although he came to the adulterous and murderous King David through the proverbial back door (via a parable), he risked his life with four short words of truth: “You are the man!” (2 Sam. 12:7). Nathan knew that when truth is spoken to power, someone pays.

John’s word to Herod Antipas echoes the courage and tenacity of Nathan and a host of other truth-proclaiming prophets before and after him. “John had been telling Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife’” (Mark 6:18). The news was no secret. Everyone who was anyone knew that under Israelite law, Herod was guilty of both adultery and incest because of his affair with his brother’s wife. Everyone who was anyone knew the word that was circulating on the street and the talk that was consuming the town. Everyone knew, but only one person spoke, and that person paid for his fidelity to truth with prison and eventually with his life. Those who describe Stephen as the first martyr for the cause of Jesus and the in-breaking kingdom of God should not forget this forerunner from the desert whose actions echo those of Nathan and the prophets of Israel, and whose death foreshadows the death of truth incarnate and love crucified.

In this season after Pentecost, as the church continues to reflect on the gift of the Spirit and the challenge of our Easter calling, it is time to once again take up the

mantle of speaking truth in love and exposing the big and small lies that entangle us and threaten our undoing. We have been baptized into Christ's life, death and resurrection. Like the Christians in Ephesus, we are a people who have "heard the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation" and have been "marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit which is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory." That pledge, among other things, demands that we live in truth, speak truth and hear truth when it is spoken to us in love.