

Truth telling

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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There was a headline yesterday, the day after the big U.S. presidential debate, that made me despair of being a human being in the 21st century. I guess to be precise, it was a tagline underneath a headline, but it was no less depressing for being in a smaller font. The tagline wasn't found on some trashy tabloid website where you would expect to find a predictable parade of click-baiting garbage. No, this was a national mainstream media article. The offending sentence read thus:

Find Out Who Lied About What and Why

Perhaps you're wondering why this sentence would provoke such a strong reaction. It was an article that was ostensibly about fact-checking, after all, and we should all be grateful that there are people out there who are able and willing to wade through the bile served up by politicians on a daily basis in the service of truth and accountability. Or, in the case of Donald Trump, that there are people willing to attempt to decode the chaotic, stream-of-consciousness assemblage of syllables and outbursts that passes for speech to find something resembling coherent truth claims to check.

What made me despair wasn't that there were fact-checking articles appearing the day after a carefully choreographed and expensive piece of advertisement presidential debate, or even really that these articles were necessary. What made me angry was simply the *assumed* nature of it all. As if it were the most normal and natural thing in the world that the morning after two millionaires who had already spent millions of other people's dollars and long, wearisome, repetitive months advertising their qualities to the American people had stood on a stage and rehearsed the same old lines and themes only this time in the presence of one another, we would all open our browsers and begin the process of trying to determine who lied about what and why. As if we all knew in advance that there would be an abundance of false claims and that the main questions would be regarding motive. As if we *expected* to be lied to. As if truth wasn't even really on

the table. As if we all knew that this whole show was, well, a *show* that was mainly about power games, spectacle, ratings, and entertainment. As if what we were mainly looking for was Twitter fodder. As if we knew that truthful speech was too much (or not enough?) to expect of politicians. As if we were all OK with this.

Yesterday morning, I went from shaking my head and my fist at the headlines on my laptop straight to the soup kitchen where our church was in charge of serving lunch. After the line starts to slow to a trickle, I always try to get out and share at least part of the meal with one of the clients. There's almost always an interesting or heartbreaking or inspiring story to encounter. There is often a tall tale or two as well. Politicians certainly don't have a monopoly on bending the truth. I've listened to a number of pretty incredible stories across the table at the soup kitchen.

But the truth is told or ignored differently by people on the wrong end of the score. Here, the truth is told on broken and abused bodies, on weary and defeated faces, on track-marked arms and bloodstained knuckles, on cheap tattoos and tattered clothing, in slurred speech and bad manners. Here, the truth isn't an inconvenience on the super highway to super power; here, it is something to be avoided, perhaps even fled from in an attempt to preserve a slice of human dignity. It feels different to be lied to here.

Every Sunday morning before worship, I have a short prayer with those involved in the service. I will almost always include some version or other of this prayer: "I pray that we would speak truly of you today." It is a risky prayer, I know. But it is a prayer borne out of one simple conviction: We humans don't tell the truth naturally or easily. Even when we want to. Our telling of the truth always has the whiff of the self attached to it. Sometimes the whiff morphs into a stench. We so often tell (or bend or ignore) the truth in order to bolster our own ideas, our own ego, our own identity, our own hope and our own fears. At our best, we want to be truth tellers, even when the truth doesn't flatter or defend or exalt us. But it's hard. The truth is such a malleable object, especially when our context trains us not to expect it. And we're so very often not at our best.

In the eighth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus said that if his disciples held to his teaching they would know the truth and that the truth would set them free. A few chapters later, he declared, "I am the way, the truth and the life." The Christian conviction has always been that truth, in the deepest sense of the word, is not a list of claims and counter-claims produced by the fact checkers or the "real story"

behind the presenting story of a human life. Christians have always believed that somehow the truth is a *person* and a *way*. And that the truth is a source of both freedom and life.

Christians have always believed that that truest truth is not a *something* but a *someone*—a someone who stands over all of our lies and partial truths, all of our misguided attempts and best intentions, even over all of our longing to be truth tellers, despite ourselves. A someone who can judge and forgive and heal and redeem all of our falsity. A someone who turned his body over to the liars and the thieves in order to tell the truth and to bear it on a blood-stained cross. And, thanks be to God, a someone who told the deepest truth of all three days later in an empty tomb to swallow up all the lies.

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