

Leo Rosten tells a story about Yuri Smolenski, a Jewish engineer in the former Soviet Union. Yuri had been ordered to move to a minor position in a faraway, frozen Siberian outpost.

His parents, in tears, were watching him pack.

"I'll write every day," said Yuri.

"But the censorship," wailed his mother. "They'll watch every word."

Yuri's father said, "I have an idea. Anything you write in black, we'll know is true. But anything you put in red ink, we'll know is nonsense!"

A month passed; then from Siberia came a long letter " all in black ink!

"Dear Mama and Papa," the letter began. "I can't tell you how happy I am here. It is a workers' paradise! We are treated like kings. I live in a fine apartment " and the local butcher has meat every single day! There are many concerts, theater, movies " all free. And there is not one tiny bit of anti-Semitism! Love, Your son, Yuri. P.S. There is only one thing you can't find here: red ink.

"Gotcha" is a game people play all the time with each other—using their statements against them to embarrass them. And this seems to be some of the complaining in the presidential campaigns this year. One of the usual "gotcha" points revolves around whether those seeking the presidency are out of touch with the rest of us. Gotcha—you're too removed to be our president. They made a lot, in the past, about Bush 41's not knowing the price of a loaf of bread, and then we had John Kerry on his yacht. The billionaire Trump uses mostly populist tactics; yeah, he thinks the way most of us think. He's really one of us! But who is that senator who ran up big bills on his credit card and seems to be financially daft? Wait a minute, doesn't that make him just like all of us? Wow, maybe we should vote for him!

In the musical Camelot, Richard Burton sang Richard Harris's song where the people say: "I wonder what the King is doing tonight? What merriment is the King pursuing tonight?" But as the song goes on, the King tells us of his nervousness and his fears. Isn't the price of leadership, of kingship, of presidency, that one ends up isolated? Surrounded by cronies, buffered by staff, protected by armies. Lonely is the head the wears the crown; lonely is the president—even when surrounded by voters.

We call Jesus a "King" this day—we would never call him president because presidents go out of office. Jesus does not. Yes the basis of Jesus' Kingship is not how far removed he is from us. Rather, it's how closely he has identified with the deepest strata inside of us. Jesus is King because he has taken the depth of humanity to the Father.

In our lesson for the day, Jesus says that for one purpose did he come into the world " to bear witness to the truth. As Pilate asked Are my truths the same as yours

IT IS SO DIFFICULT TO KNOW WHAT IS TRUE IN TODAY'S WORLD

Complicating the problem is the fact that it is equally hard to know who to trust. There are few heroes anymore, few authority figures. And everyone seems to have his or her own agenda. Al Sharpton and Jerry Falwell are both ordained ministers of the Gospel " and yet their versions of the truth are wildly different.

To make matters worse there is so much misinformation nowadays. For example it has been widely quoted that about one out of two American marriages will end in divorce. That's a lie! Government figures and a recent poll by the Louis Harris Company show that only one in eight marriages end in divorce. And in any single year, only about

2 percent of existing marriages break up. Yes, Census Bureau figures do show about 1.2 million divorces for 2.5 million marriages during an average year. But "one critical element is left out of the equation," observes Mr. Harris. "A much, much bigger 53 million other marriages just keep flowing along like Old Man River."

We've been getting a lie. Does such misinformation matter? It does if a young couple newly married decides that divorce is no big thing" after all, everybody's doing it. But it's hard to know what is true and what isn't.

Wouldn't it be great if we had some kind of truth detector that would let us know when people were being a tad dishonest. What a great thing to have when we are watching commercials or political debates or even news coverage.

The ancient Chinese had an interesting approach to discovering the truth. They knew that fear shuts off the secretion or flow of saliva in most people. In a stressful situation they would give a suspected liar a handful of rice to chew. If the suspect could spit it out, they declared him honest. But if he could not summon up enough saliva for this, they judged him afraid of discovery and therefore guilty. Maybe we could ask politicians to chew on rice before debating. It is so hard to know what is true.

YET TRUTH IS ESSENTIAL TO LIFE. Can a marriage survive where there is no trust? Can a society survive without integrity?

The pharmacist mixes the drugs upon which our very survival may depend. Suppose the pharmacist were to dilute those drugs in order to sell contraband out the back door.

The restaurant in which we eat. We expect that there will be a certain level of sanitary conditions so that the food we eat will not be exposed to disease. But what if it were not so? When you question whether a little bit of cheating is a serious matter, ask yourself how it would feel to live in a society where no one could be trusted. Truth is essential" even when it hurts.

In his book **THE DIFFERENT DRUM**, M. Scott Peck presents an interesting theory about relationships. He says God designed us to yearn for open, honest, authentic relationships" "communal" relationships. But because we choose peacekeeping over truth-telling, we end up in "pseudocommunal" relationships instead. These are marriages, family relationships, or friendships that are strictly surface level. No one says anything "unsafe." They never discuss misunderstandings, reveal hurt feelings, air frustrations, or ask difficult questions. The underlying rule in pseudocommunity is, Don't rock the boat. Don't disturb the peace. But it's a counterfeit peace. Misunderstandings arise, but they're never resolved. Feelings beg to be shared, but they're not. Offenses occur, but nobody talks about them. Doubts about the other's integrity creep in, but they're never dealt with. In time such relationships deteriorate. The secret agendas of hurt and misunderstanding lead to detachment, distrust, and bitterness. Feelings of love begin to die. It's the story of too many marriages, family relationships, and friendships.

Peck says the only antidote to pseudocommunity is chaos" Bill Hybels calls it "the tunnel of chaos," where hurts are unburied, hostilities revealed, and tough questions asked. (2)

Truth is essential to healthy relationships and healthy religion. This is what is so refreshing as well as vexing about children. Children have a tendency to tell the truth" even truth we would rather not hear.

One mother said that after watching the Cinderella movie, her five-year-old daughter was pretending she was a fairy godmother. She got her pinwheel out for a magic wand and told her mom that she could make three wishes and the fairy godmother would grant them. Her mom first asked for world peace, and with a slight wave of her wand the girl proclaimed it done. Then her mom asked that all the sick children in the world would be cured instantly, and once again with a slight wave that request was granted. Since mom was overweight, her third request was that she would have a trim figure. Her daughter began wildly waving the wand up and down saying, "I don't know mom, I may need more power for this one!"

Children have a way of speaking the truth. And sometimes we need the truth spoken.

Truth is essential. No building will endure that is constructed on a false foundation. But there is one thing more to be said: WHEN IT COMES TO SPIRITUAL THINGS, TRUTH IS CHRIST.

A young Chinese boy who wanted to learn about jade went to study with a famous old teacher. This elderly gentleman put a piece of the jade into the boy's hand and told him to hold it tight. Then the old man began to talk of philosophy, men, women, the sun, and almost everything under it. After an hour, he took back the stone and sent the boy home. The procedure was repeated for weeks. The boy became frustrated. When would he be told about jade? he wondered. But he was too polite to interrupt his venerable teacher. Then one day when the old man put an ordinary stone into the boy's hands, the boy cried out instantly, "That's not jade!" The boy now knew the feel of jade. He would not be fooled by something artificial.

There are so many ideas in the religious marketplace today. Even within the Christian community there are so many versions of the truth. When all is said and done, though, there is only one truth by which all spiritual practice should be judged, and that truth is this: What would Jesus do? What would Jesus say? Is this in keeping with the spirit of Christ? I know that scholars debate which of the teachings of Jesus are authentic and which have been added by tradition. That is of little consequence. Faithful believers early in the life of the church selected this body of information that we have collected in the Four Gospels, and said that for us this is the Way, the Truth and the Life "this is God revealing Good News for our world. They concluded that this is an accurate account of the life and ministry of the Word made flesh. This was their testimony and it is good enough for me. Truth is Christ.

Jesus comes as a witness to, a martyr for, truth—the truth that is in the beginning and will be the only thing that remains in the end, the truth of sacrificial love. How often we think God plays “gotcha” with us, waiting for us to commit our foibles so we can stand in shame. But God plays no games. God does not stand on the side, distant from us, musing or amused. In Jesus, God takes what is best in us into the Kingdom and sends his Son to be so close to us that even our brokenness can be part of God’s victory. Steve Brown tells the story of a British soldier in the First World War who lost heart for the battle and deserted. Trying to reach the coast for a boat to England that night, he ended up wandering in the pitch black night, hopelessly lost. In the darkness he came across what he thought was a signpost. It was so dark that he began to climb the post so that he could read it. As he reached the top of the pole, he struck a match to see and found himself looking squarely into the face of Jesus. He realized that, rather than running into a signpost, he had climbed a roadside crucifix. Brown explains: "Then he remembered the One who had died for him...who had endured...who had never turned back. The next morning the soldier was back in the trenches." (4)

Leo Rosten, THE JOYS OF YINGLISH, (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1992.

Bill Hybels, HONEST TO GOD? (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan Publishing House, 1992).

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