

Easter is past, spring has settled in, lawn mowers can once again be heard, along with birdsong in the morning. This time of year, every corner we turn holds a flower or a budding tree or something else of beauty. Spring is a good reminder that there is beauty everywhere we look, if only we pay attention. That is also true of wisdom. When I was little, I thought the only people who knew anything were my parents. Then I learned other people were also wise. When I began to get passionate about the Christian faith, I thought the church was the sole repository of wisdom, but now I know that wisdom, like the rain in spring, runs in many streams and flows from many places.

So these days I take wisdom wherever I find it. I care less about labels and boundaries and guardians of faith, and more about those flowers of truth which bloom in unexpected nooks. Last year, for instance, I was speaking at a Rotary Club as a favor to a friend, and heard, for the first time, the Four-Way Test, four questions Rotarians ask themselves when faced with an ethical question or concern.

Is it the truth?

Is it fair to all concerned?

Will it build goodwill and better friendships?

Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

I heard those questions, thought they were a wonderful guide to living, so wish to talk about them further. Let's begin with the first test: Is it the truth? Is what I am thinking, saying, or doing, the truth?

I want to make two observations about truth. This past week, I was standing in line at a gas station, waiting, while a man in front of me was buying lottery tickets. Instead of moving to the side to scratch off his tickets, he stood at the counter, scratching off his tickets, while engaging the clerk in a discussion about a current social issue. He seemed to be of one mind, while the clerk was of a different mind, and they were arguing, each of them buttressing their arguments with wild claims and assertions and finally accusations that couldn't possibly have been true. Meanwhile, I just stood there listening, waiting my turn at the counter. At one time I would have been annoyed by the delay, but now I look at those moments as potential essays or sermon illustrations and they don't bother me at all.

But as I listened to the two people bicker, I began thinking about our tendency to confuse truth and passion. The criteria for truth has become this: If I believe something strongly, it must be true. Well, not necessarily.

I feel passionately about a number of things, which I assume are true, but when I take the time to listen to someone who knows something I don't or I study or do research, I might discover I was mistaken. Even though I know I'm wrong, it is so hard to say, "I must have been mistaken. I'll have to rethink this." Because I had all this emotion invested in what I thought was the truth. Believing passion was the test for truth, I gauged the truth of something by my feelings about it.

I received an e-mail this week from a man who'd read my most recent book and he wrote saying, "I am going to put this new book, *If the Church Were Christian*, in the garbage. You should be ashamed of yourself for putting such garbage into a book. I pray you repent."

I wrote back urging him to recycle the book instead, and he responded even more heatedly and I wrote back, then after awhile he settled down and even apologized. But there was all this passion, you see, and anytime we are that passionate, we naturally assume what we're passionate about must be the truth, otherwise we wouldn't feel so strongly about it.

This is especially true in religion, where passion and certainty are ever present and often connected.

Here's my experience: the more true something is, the more softly it speaks. It needs no defense, no voices raised on its behalf. Indeed, the less true something is, the more propping up and protection it requires.

The story is told of Galileo's trial, where he stated that the earth wasn't flat, but round. And, he added, neither is the earth the center of the universe. This caused much wailing and gnashing of teeth and Galileo was sentenced to house arrest for the crime of heresy. As he was walking back to his seat, Galileo turned to the judge and said quietly, "Sentence me to house arrest, but the earth, she's still round."

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Here's the other observation: Truth isn't just something we speak, it is something we live. Is your life true? Does it reflect the qualities and virtues of truth? Let me describe what I mean by that.

The summer of my 20th year, I bought a new bicycle and began taking long rides through the country. Sunday afternoon was my free time, so every Sunday afternoon I'd take off and ride thirty or forty miles. Early that fall, a friend of mine who rode with me, said, "We ought to ride the Hilly Hundred." The Hilly Hundred was a two-day hundred mile bicycle ride through Monroe and Brown counties.

The ride included, as you probably discerned from its name, some very steep hills. I was young and foolish and agreed to go. I hadn't ridden more than a mile the first day, when I took my attention from the road and hit a chuckhole, which bent my front rim. At first, I wasn't aware of that. I only noticed the bicycle was more difficult to pedal, it seemed to be fighting me, resisting me. A man pedaling past me, said, "Your front wheel is bent." So I looked down and sure enough, the bicycle rim was bent and rubbing on the brakes.

I thought, "Oh, great. I've just started and I'll have to stop." I was very discouraged.

But another man stopped, looked at my front wheel, and said, "I can fix that." He took a small tool from his seat bag, turned my bicycle upside down, and began adjusting the tension on the spokes, adjusting the rim back into line.

I'd never seen that done before because I'd always ridden bicycle built like tanks whose rims never bent. He finished straightening the wheel, then smiled and said, "There you go, friend. It's all trued up."

I thanked him profusely, shook his hand, patted him on the back, I was very excited, climbed back on my bike and continued my ride. My bike felt great. No more fighting me, no more undue strain. It was so much easier, because my bicycle had been trued up.

I think about that sometimes when my life gets difficult and I seem to be meeting resistance, and my life feels out of round. What do I need to do to true it up? Is there something I've done to make it out of balance and what adjustments can I make it more level, more balanced, more true? Where is my wheel bent?

You know what I generally find? I discover that somewhere along the line I stopped being true to my deepest values, and so my life became out of round.

Perhaps I forgot about the importance of simplicity and over-committed and over-extended myself.

Perhaps I told a lie and am suffering the consequences of my dishonesty.

Perhaps I am estranged from someone I love and am feeling miserable and lonely.

So I need to stop, discern where my life is rubbing, and true up my life, make some adjustments, repair what's been knocked out of balance.

I leave with you these two insights about truth:

Just because we feel something deeply and passionately doesn't make it true.

When our lives are out of round, out of balance, it is well worth our effort to stop and true them up.