"Is It Live or Is It Memorex?"

Third Sunday after Epiphany
8:30 and 10:45 a.m. Sunday, January 27, 2013
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; I Corinthians 12:12-31a;
Luke 4:14-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We’ve been confronted with deception over the last couple weeks. It runs the gamut from the serious to the silly. We have Lance Armstrong and his countless denials about the use of performance drugs in the sport of cycling. We have a young
college football player, Manti Te’o, convinced that he was in a real relationship with a real woman he met on-line. We have Beyoncé, whose gorgeous voice sailed out over the Mall in our National Anthem on Inaugural Day. Granted, these are celebrities, and our wrongful tendency is to elevate them higher than perhaps we ought. Yet even so, the deception—whether that deception be for malevolent reasons or not—is profoundly disappointing to us. For we’ve learned that people often aren’t who they say they are. We’ve discovered that people often show the world the person they want the world to see, and it’s an illusion.

For cycling enthusiasts (and we have our fair share here in this worship space), Armstrong’s word, the story of his surviving cancer, and his Livestrong Foundation were all wrapped up together. They
were his identity for us. And then we learn from Oprah that Armstrong really did use banned drugs to boost his ability, really did influence and encourage others on his teams to do the same, really was involved in the entire illegal affair, and lied about it for years. Oh, how the mighty have fallen, but it is without joy or satisfaction that I say that. That illusion of high standards and ethical behavior—that deception—has done so much damage, way beyond Lance Armstrong himself.

Manti Te’o? He’s just a young man. I do not doubt he fell in love with this woman who conversed with him on-line for three years. The fact they never met wasn’t an impediment to these feelings. But he knew well enough that it didn’t seem like a normal boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, so he felt compelled to lie to his own family about it, pretending that, yes, of course he had met her face to face. So, as
he was being deceived about the reality of this person, he, too, was deceiving his own family. The girl’s “death” was yet another cruel hoax for him, yet he had to persist in the illusion that this person was real because by the time he knew it was a hoax, the whole sporting world was focused on Notre Dame University and Manti Te’o—poor, courageous Manti Te’o.

As for Beyoncé—lip-synching to a recorded track is not a heinous crime. Any of us can understand how performing music outdoors in a huge venue in the middle of winter is a difficult enterprise, and fraught with potential problems. In order for the sound to be perfect, it appears a decision was made for Beyoncé to lip-synch the National Anthem, using a recording she’d previously made indoors. But do the powers that be that made that decision, and does Beyoncé herself realize that most of us would have
listened with rapture to Beyoncé’s voice even on a bad day, and wish we could sing like she. Still, an illusion had to be created. How silly and unnecessary.

Celebrity or not, perhaps we all fall into that trap of presenting to the world the person we want the world to see, creating an illusion. Because I suspect most of us want to be seen as competent or ethical or handsome or selfless or intelligent or “having it all together.” For any of you watching “Downton Abbey” on Masterpiece Theatre as I am, you know the Crowley family is uber-concerned with how the Crowley family looks to the outside world. Even those of us without royal title who aren’t Earls or Ladies feel the same. We don’t air our dirty linen in public, especially in church. We hesitate to show our weaknesses or admit our foibles. We can be less than honest about ourselves with others. (Hi—
how are you? I’m fine!) We resist letting others know about a need in our life that we ourselves can’t meet, a problem in our life that we ourselves can’t fix. Some days we’re lip-synching like mad.

But if you and I insist on being that way, on pretending to be someone we are not for fear we will not appear “successful,” for fear that we will not be valued or loved for who we really are, then Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel lesson will mean nothing to us. Only someone who admits to being imperfect will hear these words as good news. Only someone who gets discouraged in life will benefit from Jesus’ preaching. Only someone who is heartbroken in their loss or conflicted or in need of healing or disappointed or struggling to make ends meet or lonely or hemmed in by fear—only those people will cling to what Jesus has to say today as their lifeline and their hope. Because those are the kinds of
people Jesus is speaking to. Not to those who are perfect and presentable, not to those who don’t need him.

And is it safe for me to say you and I need him?

If so, then let’s listen to what Jesus has to say to us here in Luke’s Gospel. I like what David Lose from Luther Seminary writes about this text. He calls it Jesus’ Inaugural Address. Consider again Jesus’ words spoken in the synagogue. First, he reads from a scroll the words of the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then Jesus hands the scroll back to the attendant,
sits down, and simply says: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

It is our Lord’s Inaugural Address. For here Jesus lays out his vision of what the kingdom of God looks like. Here Jesus lays out his mission to bring that kingdom into reality. Here Jesus lays out his very identity (notice he doesn’t pretend to be anyone other than who he is), and he declares that this tremendous good news intended for broken people is happening right then and there—in him. He is God’s love for everyone, including you and me, and that love effects change and renewal in ordinary lives like ours. In Jesus’ Inaugural Address each one of us here is welcomed to receive that Good News for ourselves.

Professor Lose suggested something else about this lesson, and I concur, especially as it connects with
the portion of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians that we also heard today. Lose writes, “We are invited...not just to hear and receive good news, but to be it.” (Working Preacher, 1/20/13) Let me suggest how Paul believes this possible.

Paul uses a metaphor with the Corinthian Christians as a way of describing the Church, their community of faith. He uses the metaphor of the body. Now, this was not some novel metaphor. In Paul’s day, the image of the body and its different parts was a common metaphor for groups, organizations and social systems in Greek and Roman culture. But in those arenas, the emphasis on differing parts usually suggested a hierarchy. There were parts of the body that were lesser or inferior, just as there were people who were lesser or inferior. The metaphor of the body was used to reinforce status: who was more important, who was superior, who was
deserving of attention and accolades. And can’t you see how that kind of system only promoted deception in people? Everyone wanted to look perfect and presentable, to be important and valued. The idea of living an illusion was propped up by such a metaphor.

But Paul takes the metaphor of the body and turns it all around. He speaks of a *unity* of all the parts. That we function together as the Body of Christ. And what’s more, Paul says this is God’s plan: “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.” Then Paul goes on to wonder hypothetically what the body would be like without each one of those parts. The body would have problems, he says, because each part is indispensable to the whole. Each part is worthy of honor. You know what that means for us? That newly-baptized four-year old Cassidy Jane is just as
important and valued as Mrs. Enney in this place. That a 92-year-old parishioner in the local nursing home who cannot speak a coherent sentence is just as loved as a new senior pastor who will preach in our pulpit. And Paul concludes that God’s design here is so there is no dissension in the body, but rather, that “the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” In other words, each part of the Body of Christ (each member of this faith community) is designed by God to bring good news to the other parts, to be Christ to one another.

Well, we’ve just learned through Jesus and Paul our true identity! There is no need to offer up an illusion about who we are. We are imperfect people who also happen to be God’s beloved children and Jesus’ body. We are created to live out this Good
News both here and everywhere we go. Now that we know who we are, we don’t have to pretend to be anyone else.

AMEN.

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