

Truth Heals

We interrupt our journey through the Gospel of Mark to celebrate our patron saint, Luke the Evangelist. Based on what little we know about him, Luke is thought to have been a doctor and the personal physician of Saint Paul. The author of the third Gospel and the Book of Acts, Luke was intelligent, literate, and a smooth navigator of threats to the early church. Although Paul's reference to Luke in his letter to Timothy is our only explicit link between the two saints, Acts records Paul's story in enough detail that Luke might well have been Paul's doctor and traveling companion. There's less evidence for Luke's reputation as the iconographer who created the first portrait of the Holy Mother, but there's no denying the artistry in his writing. Luke gives us an especially nuanced portrait of Jesus and a compelling picture of the community in which he lived. We are blessed to have such an extraordinary artist and healer as our patron.

In today's passage from Luke's Gospel, Jesus has returned to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit after his recent baptism. His teaching in the synagogues has been widely praised. Now, Jesus is back in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. He reads Isaiah's prophecy about the coming Messiah and, in a mic drop moment, calmly informs the congregation that "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Can't you just imagine the gossip? Nazareth must have been ringing with idle chatter for days. "Were you there? Did you hear what Jesus said about himself? Has he gone completely crazy? Such arrogance!" All of which might well have been capped off with "honestly, who does that man think he is?"

Bible scholar Fred Craddock correctly observes that Luke puts Jesus squarely in the Hebrew tradition here, but there's nothing uniquely Jewish about gossip. In any community, whether it's a small congregation or a vast and mighty nation, people love to talk about one another. Oscar Wilde playfully quipped that "there is only one thing in life worse than being

talked about, and that is not being talked about.” For most of us, however, it's no fun to be gossiped about, especially if the things that are being said are malicious or untrue.

Regrettably, we live in the Age of Disinformation and falsehoods abound. Just this week, social media presented me with the story of a veteran who was facing the death penalty after his daughter was assaulted by refugees whom he killed to avenge her honor. The author urged everyone reading to support this devoted father and patriot. The only problem, apart from the fact that murder is illegal and “vengeance is mine” sayeth the Lord, is that the story was an out-and-out lie. It was concocted to stir up hostility against refugees, and it has been circulating on the Internet since at least 2016. I don't know why it showed up in my Quora feed, and I was deeply troubled to see the hateful responses from readers who embraced the lie even after others had proved it false. They seemed eager to believe the worst of those who come to our country in search of a better life and overjoyed to think that their prejudices had been validated.

In a recent article for *The Atlantic* titled, “I’m Running Out of Ways to Explain How Bad This Is,” journalist Charlie Warzel warns that America is facing something darker than a mere misinformation crisis. In the wake of Hurricanes Helene and Milton, Warzel laments that “[a]s two catastrophic storms upended American cities, a patchwork network of influencers and fake-news peddlers have done their best to sow distrust, stoke resentment, and interfere with relief efforts.” He writes, “[t]o watch as real information is overwhelmed by crank theories and public servants battle death threats is to confront two alarming facts: first, that a durable ecosystem exists to ensconce citizens in an alternate reality, and second, that the people consuming and amplifying those lies are not helpless dupes but willing participants.” Warzel warns that a great many of us are choosing to live in an alternate reality built on mistrust and grievance where feelings win out over facts and our darkest delusions go unchallenged. It’s unhealthy as hell.

We know precious little about Saint Luke, and not much more about Jesus. We don't know what Jesus looked like. We don't know whether he tended to be funny or serious, what personal quirks he had, or what he preferred for dinner. But we do know this: Jesus always told the truth. Even when he knew the truth would bewilder his disciples, upset many of his followers and offend the powerful people who would ultimately take his life, Jesus told the truth and he didn't sugarcoat it. Jesus values the truth so much that, in the Gospel of John, he promises those who follow his teachings that they will see the truth, and the truth will set them free. I believe that our patron, Saint Luke the physician, might add that healing can only happen where there is truth. You can't cure an illness or heal an injury without first admitting the truth that you have it.

I also believe that churches don't choose their patron saints by accident. Although I haven't yet been able to find out why the people who launched this little church named it for Saint Luke, one of many possible patrons for this congregation, the sainted healer, writer, artist, and loyal companion seems to me to be the perfect choice. Luke's Gospel has always been my favorite, not only for its elegant phrasing and exquisite parables, but for the love that radiates from every word. If you believe, as I do, that those of us who follow Christ are watched over by a great cloud of faithful witnesses, perhaps it's not too much of a reach to imagine Saint Luke keeping a loving, protective eye on this church and its dear people.

If Paul's beloved physician has a special affection for us, how can we best reciprocate? I'm sure Saint Luke is delighted by our food pantry, community outreach, and the warm welcome we extend to newcomers each week. He must love our glorious music and our care for God's beautiful creation. I wonder, though, if we don't owe Jesus, Saint Luke, and one another special attention to what truths we speak and how we speak them. Within the congregation, some people – yes, more than one – tell me that they are reluctant to put anyone on the prayer list

because they see it as fodder for gossip. They miss the benefit of our prayers, and that's a shame. It's especially troubling when rumors circulate that are hurtful or untrue. Gossip is a human weakness, and I don't think it's widespread here. If we're serious about being a community of love, though, it's better to ask people how they're doing instead of speculating with others and not to make comments that will sting when they're repeated to the person being discussed.

In the wider world, the Episcopal Church and St. Luke's must embody Christian truth, and we need to do it with love. By that, I don't mean that we have to compromise our principles or choose to ignore deliberate fraud. The truth matters. But I believe we must follow the instructions that Jesus gave us in Luke's Gospel: love our enemies; do good to those who hate us; bless those who curse us; pray for those who mistreat us; and do unto others as we would have them do unto us. That probably means giving up some of our own cherished illusions, sometimes biting our tongues when we'd rather not, and trusting God to bring the truth to light. Instead of forcing our truths on others, Jesus might prefer that we embody his truth by engaging gently with those who are so terrified of the truth that they'd rather live in a web of dark, poisonous lies.

When Jesus spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth, he revealed the profound and beautiful truth that he is the Messiah, just as Luke and his fellow evangelists tell us. Sadly for them, his former neighbors weren't ready to accept that truth. In this season of outlandish conspiracy theories, manufactured scandals, and just plain balderdash, may our eyes and hearts stay open so we can recognize and accept the truth even when it's hard. May we engage those who are trapped in ugly lies with compassion as well as honesty. Saint Luke, beloved physician, we thank you for your patronage and ask you to pray that we may care for one another and spread healing wherever we go. And Lord Jesus, grant us grace to seek and share the truth within and outside these walls, not in anger or self-righteousness, but in love and faithfulness to you. Amen.