I had a strong impulse to change the theme of the month. I didn’t want to preach about truth. I’m not entirely sure what that was, but I know that the world has changed entirely since these theological themes were decided. Truth is our theme for May and I didn’t know what to say. I think that the current politically motivated denial of science had something to do with it. The tendency of our president to tell outright lies. The last thing I want to do is get into a discussion of “fake news.”

It seems like the world has flipped upside down. Years ago, it was the religious right that insisted there was a Truth with a capital T – generally purported to be found in the Bible - and the liberal left who spoke of a postmodern relativity, dependent on point of view. Now, most of us would only wish that those in power would hold some “truths to be self-evident” and not change the rules or deny the facts to suit the prevailing political wind. Or keep telling us that “we’ve tested more than every country combined,” despite the proof.

And of course, what is hard, is that whatever we might ultimately hold to be true, lies at neither extreme – Truth with a capital T or all opinions treated equally.

“You can only be sure when to act in retrospect” said Scottish epidemiologist John Cowden. I’ll get to that quote soon. But first, I’m not sure if I’ve told you before about the first sermon I preached at the chapel of the First Unitarian Church of Chicago on Chicago’s southside. I was in seminary across the street, and as a student, I understandably wanted to make a strong first impression on my classmates and especially my professors. I had a very scholarly sermon, with quotes from lots of experts – I can’t tell you what the subject was – but only that I stacked no fewer than 4 books on the pulpit beside me, in case people were interested in the sources of all my brilliance.

This sermon was then critiqued by my peers in preaching class and my professor, the Rev. David Bumbaugh remarked on my reticence to speak from my own authority and experience, and to rely on the books and others to say what I wanted to say.... or maybe it was my internship supervisor, the Rev. Ruppert Lovely – memory is funny – one of these men whom I respected greatly told me, “you don’t have to be right, you just have to be honest.”

I’ve quoted that line for years now; only I’m not sure the source of it. but as Theodore Parker preached, “it seems difficult to conceive any reason why moral and religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer” ..
The authority of my preaching professor or internship supervisor, should instead rest on the truth of his words…. and as far as I’m concerned, whoever said them, the words have stood the test of time and experience.

The difference between being right and honest has to do with your take on Truth. Right, somehow, indicating that you understand it all and that your understanding is absolute and correct. Honest, being more like true to your experience of the truth, however more vast it may actually turn out to be.

Parker, of course, was referring to the fact that Christianity had made the truth rest on the personal authority of Jesus, rather than the truth of the doctrines themselves.

“It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid, or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority.” Said Theodore Parker in 1841.

And related to the axioms of mathematics and science, there was a good article in the New Yorker recently about the different responses to this pandemic in the states of Washington and New York.

According to this April 26th story by Charles Duhigg – he was the author of the Power of Habit, King County Executive, Dow Constantine told Duhigg that he understands why politicians “want to be front and center and take the credit.” And he noted that Seattle has many of “the same problems here you see in Congress, with the partisanship and toxicity.” But, he said, “everyone, Republicans and Democrats, came together behind one message and agreed to let the scientists take the lead.”

“Epidemiology” he wrote in that article, “is a science of possibilities and persuasion, not of certainties or hard proof. “Being approximately right most of the time is better than being precisely right occasionally,” the Scottish epidemiologist John Cowden wrote, in 2010. “You can only be sure when to act in retrospect.” Epidemiologists must persuade people to upend their lives—to forgo travel and socializing, to submit themselves to blood draws and immunization shots—even when there’s scant evidence that they’re directly at risk.’

A science of possibilities and persuasion, not of certainties or hard proof. And that’s the thing, isn’t it? There are few certainties and little hard proof. There is only the honest examination and exploration.

The wise men who touch that elephant, exploring its contours and textures, its shape and sound, coming to different and yet entirely accurate and mostly wrong conclusions.

As we launched our annual pledge campaign the very week we began to understand our lives were about to be changed forever due to this pandemic, the Board President, aptly called the
pandemic the elephant in the room, and the economic hardship that will result due to necessary precautions we are undertaking to stay alive. The fact that some will die. And, of course, that illness and the economic hardship was going to affect not only families who belong to this congregation, but the institution itself.

I’m happy to report to you all that with help from our administrator, your Treasurer, Dave Fleming, applied for the payroll protection program from the small business administration, and we received word from our bank that we qualified and would receive such aid to keep our church employees on payroll for eight weeks of this however-long-it-will-take quarantine. That doesn’t mean we don’t need your pledge; of course, and we’re grateful for those of you who have turned in your pledges. I know the volunteers have begun the arduous task of following up with those of you who were delayed in responding, some of which we assume is due to a pandemic that has thrown off all sense of a normal time and increased financial insecurity for many.

And because we are a people of faith who do believe in science, we will not be lifting restrictions on meeting together until there is evidence that it will not thrust us back into danger. And we will need to be a people of faith, as there is no end in sight, only that epidemiological truth that “you can only be sure when to act in retrospect.”

You don’t have to be right, you just have to be honest, is such a helpful way for me to understand truth. Because, by being honest, that is, reflecting realistically on what is, I believe that “truth” emerges.

“As sure as I am wise that this elephant is like a great mud wall baked hard in the sun.” “No,- he is exactly like a spear.” this elephant is very much like a rope, shouted the third man.. A serpent! A fan! The trunk of a great areca palm tree”

Ronnie’s truth coming of age as a black man in the 70’s and the truth of his elder who had come of age in an earlier era. The truth of my colleague whose tender wounds are touched by a 5 year old and her exquisite response. What you risk telling your story...no one will understand, their eyes become fences, you will park yourself forever on the outside your differentness once and for all revealed dangerous....(Laura Hershey)

I’ve been thinking a bit about how all this social distancing can serve to help us with that all too human tendency to view differentness as dangerous. Herd immunity is something we’ve heard a bit about in the context of this current pandemic.

And yet it is also a concept within the context of family systems– which draws its theory from animal behavior, including but not limited to human behavior. Emotional interdependence among humans probably served to promote cohesiveness and cooperation to protect, shelter and feed members of a family, but heightened tension and anxiety can lead to problems. When members of a group get anxious, the anxiety can be described as spreading infectiously among members of the group.
I’m sure you’ve probably had one or two instances in the history of this congregation where anxiety got quite high among the people – this is often when people resign out of frustration and people quit coming to worship. They gossip in small groups and spread rumors – inaccurate information, such as “we’ve tested more than anybody else times two” – only on a congregational, not national level. I’m sure that’s happened in this congregation in its history – as most groups go through such heightened anxiety at some point.

For that reason, I wonder if this social distancing can also serve to provide the emotional distance humans need to self-differentiate while staying connected. To allow us that power of witnessing talked about with meditation – witnessing our own behavior, or a loved ones behavior – without judgment and with great compassion. When we’re not so caught up in the emotional anxious field of another, we have a better chance of stepping back and analyzing the situation with calm and care. We can actually develop a kind of immunity to anxiety – or at least the anxiety brought about by being close to anxious others, and thus provide a clear, unobstructed path to understanding, and get to solutions quicker and develop healthier relationships. Differentness no longer feels so dangerous because members of the group have emotionally matured and understand that we can stay connected while expressing different opinions while holding on to a different part of that elephant.

As the country gets more anxious – that is, more demonstrations, such as took place at the Clark County Courthouse on Friday, or more dramatically, in my previous home of Lansing, MI where the protestors carried rifles even into the Capitol building itself – to protest the governor’s emergency declaration to help them save their own lives... As the country gets more anxious, it is up to us, to contend with and learn from our own anxiety. We must become the change we seek, if we are to come out of this crisis better. It is an opportunity. Not one we asked for, not one we welcome, but an opportunity nonetheless. That is the truth of our situation. May we make the best of it.