

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *Telling the Truth*

by

Frederick Buechner

1. Frederick Buechner references an idea expressed in Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "The truth is worth making a fool of yourself to tell" (p. 5). What do you think Buechner means by this? What truths might be worth making fools of ourselves to tell?
2. Still referring to *King Lear*, Buechner asserts that while bad people are "transformed by their suffering into beasts," good people are "hallowed" by their suffering (p. 6). What does this sentiment mean to you? Is this something you have experienced or observed, either positively or negatively?
3. In his reflection about the gospel as tragedy, Buechner suggests that preachers must "obey the sadness of our times by taking it into account without equivocation or subterfuge" (p. 7). Think of a couple of examples that

might reflect the “sadness of our times.” In what way ought a preacher obey it?

4. Buechner says that a person who looks in the mirror sees “at least eight parts chicken, phony, slob” (p. 7). Even so, the positive side of the gospel message is that we are also loved and forgiven. He calls these opposing realities the tragic and comedic elements of the gospel story. In what ways have you experienced one or both sides of the tragicomedy of your life?
5. In an inventive re-creation of the meeting between Jesus and Pilate, Buechner highlights Pilate’s question, “What is truth?” (p. 14). He posits that the best answer is the one Jesus gave Pilate: silence. Is this how you would answer this question? Why do you think Buechner suggests silence as the best answer?
6. Buechner encourages preachers not to use words that give answers, but instead to use words that raise questions that only a deep reflective silence can answer. “Drawing on nothing fancier than the poetry of his own life, let him use words and images that help make the surface of our lives transparent to the truth that lies deep within them, which is the wordless truth of who we are and who God is” (p. 24). Have you experienced sermons that have asked more than they answered? If so, what was the result?
7. Buechner cites a line in a novel: “Every person has one particular time in his life when he is more beautiful than he is ever going to be again” (p. 29). Have you

experienced the feeling of being more beautiful at one point in your life than you'll ever be again? What is the nature of this beauty? Is it purely physical or also related to one's character?

8. Observing that "Hell is where the action is. . . . It is where the pitiless storm is" (p. 39), Buechner claims that God is the Father in both Heaven *and* Hell. Does this surprise you? Do you agree that God is the Father who art (also) in Hell? Why or why not?
9. Buechner quotes a statement from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, in which a preacher says, "Woe to him who seeks to pour oil upon the waters when God has brewed them into a gale. Woe to him who seeks to please rather than to appal" (p. 45). What do you think of this statement? Why do you think Buechner finds it meaningful? In the life of the Spirit, why might one try to appal rather than to please?
10. Buechner contrasts life as a black comedy—hardships and suffering that are impossible to account for—and as a white comedy, "the high comedy of Christ," which brings us close to glad tears (p. 61). Has this white comedy—that is, an inexplicable element of joy and gladness despite suffering—played out in your life? How so?
11. Buechner likens Jesus's parables to jokes about the outlandishness of God, outlandishness that shows itself through God's "doing impossible things with impossible people." He cites Matthew 13:12: "To him who has,

more will be given and from him who has not even what he has will be taken away” (p. 65). How does this saying, which concludes several parables spoken by Jesus, reflect what Buechner deems to be God’s outlandishness? Do you agree?

12. Referring to the classic book by C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Buechner suggests that the fantasy world discovered by the Pevensie children was realized the other way around—that is, the fantasy world *found them* (p. 77). Have you ever experienced a discovery of some sort that seemed to have found you? If so, what?
13. Expanding on fantasy worlds—including ones that end well—Buechner maintains that they are full of “darkness and danger and ambiguity” (p. 78). What do you think he means by this? Think of an example in a fairy tale, and describe how the dark elements add to the drama of the story.
14. When defining fairy tales, Buechner finds that J. R. R. Tolkien’s definition captures it best: “[a fairy tale] does not deny the existence of . . . sorrow and failure . . . ; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat” (p. 81). How might this notion be applied to the “fairy tale” that is your life? In other words, despite failures and discouragement, have you also felt ultimate assurance of goodness?
15. Likening the gospel story to the consummate fairy tale, Buechner concludes that there is a striking difference:

“It not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still” (p. 90). Does the gospel as fairy tale resonate with your experience of faith? Why or why not?