

“What Is Truth?”  
John 18:33-38  
Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.  
Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church  
July 12, 2020

The inspiration for this morning’s sermon came from an article I read last month by Peter Wehner- one of the most respected conservative voices in America who worked in the administrations of our last three Republican Presidents: Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush. He is also a devout Christian whose writing on the nexus between faith and politics is some of the most incisive social commentary you will find anywhere. The title of Wehner’s article was “Trump Has Made Alternative Facts a Way of Life” and in it, he expressed his concern over what he insists are the outrageous number of false statements continuing to spew from the mouth of this President. He began by saying:

*No president in the history of our Republic has been as disorienting as Donald Trump. His goal, even before he became president, was far more ambitious than to tell mere lies. It was to annihilate the distinction between truth and falsity, to make sure that we no longer share facts in common, to overwhelm people with misinformation and disinformation. It was to induce epistemological vertigo on a mass scale.*

Further on, he stated:

*“At a fundamental level, then, the Trump presidency has been about projecting shadows on walls and asking us to believe they are real.”*

But then he expresses his GREATEST concern over the endless stream of misstatements and untruths emanating from this administration:

*The president’s brazen assaults on truth were jolting at first. Today, however, we have grown accustomed to them — and to the fact that Republican officeholders have almost without exception stood behind him during the last three-and-a-half years.*

Well I ALSO share Wehner’s concerns- I can’t think of another period in my lifetime when a national discussion on the nature of truth has become more crucial. In light of the current schism within the body politic--one that has divided families, communities, and even our CHURCHES—I believe one of the GREATEST casualties has been the truth itself. On one side of the political divide, there are those who ardently claim that Donald Trump is a serial liar who has precipitated a “war on truth.” On the other side, you have those who refer to the media as purveyors of “fake news,” as liberal shells who traffick in lies in order to destroy his Presidency. Last year on *Meet The Press*, moderator Chuck Todd got into a testy debate with former mayor Rudolph Giuliani when he took issue with what he felt were the astonishing number of falsehoods emanating from this White House. In response, Giuliani blurted out “But Chuck, truth isn’t truth,” a summation that left Todd at a complete loss for words. Consequently, many find themselves angry and confused, wondering what IS true and who it is they CAN believe in all of this.

But the question “What is truth?” isn’t just confined to our present political climate, it is a question that is as old as antiquity itself as we learn in this morning’s scripture lesson- a question which arose two thousand years ago during a particular trial that was held in secret and under the cover of night. In fact, when compared to TODAY’S court cases, it could hardly have even been CALLED a trial. Because the Roman world did not allow trials for those considered

socially inferior, Jesus instead faced a proceeding where the local governor--in this case Pontius Pilate--functioned as both judge and jury. Thus Jesus's fate would ultimately lie in HIS hands and no one else's.

Earlier that evening, the religious leaders had conducted their OWN trial of Jesus and, not surprisingly, found him guilty. Now they sought a CIVIL trial before Pilate. Because they didn't possess the power to sentence him to death, they knew that such an order could only come from the local governor, the Roman Procurator. Of course, they were well aware that Pilate would laugh at them if they told him that Christ was guilty of blasphemy for Rome was the most polytheistic culture in the ancient world- Romans possessed a whole PANTHEON of gods for persons to choose from. Thus, these Jewish leaders came up with not one but THREE accusations to ensure that Pilate would hear their case. The FIRST allegation was that Jesus subverted their nation, that he was anti-Caesar and anti-Rome. The SECOND was that he opposed the payment of taxes to Caesar- a very severe charge since it was through taxation that Rome was able to continue her many building projects and finance her wars. The THIRD was that he was setting himself up as a rival king to Caesar- the most SERIOUS accusation OF ALL.

Naturally, every one of these charges was a lie. Had he TRULY been the revolutionary they claimed he was, Pilate would have heard of him much earlier. And rather than withhold taxes, he had told his followers to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." And as for the allegation he had declared himself a king, the gospels tell us how after he miraculously fed five thousand persons on a hillside overlooking the sea of Galilee, the people sought to seize him and MAKE him their king but Jesus--perceiving their intentions--escaped from their midst.

Still, the charges leveled by the Jews are serious enough that Pilate has to at least hear the case. He escorts Jesus into the Praetorium--the judgment hall of the palace which no Jew would dare enter for fear of defilement--so that there would just be the two of them. Interestingly, Pilate never even inquires of the first two charges but deals only with the THIRD and most SERIOUS one. He asks Jesus straight out, "ARE you the king of the Jews?" Jesus responds that his kingdom is not of this world, that HAD it been, his followers would have fought to defend him from being arrested. As it was, he had no palace, no treasury, no army to speak of- nothing but a rag tag group of followers whose only weapon was compassion.

Jesus then goes on to explain to Pilate the nature of his kingdom. He tells him, "This is why I was born, and why I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." Here Jesus reveals the PURPOSE of his life and mission- to "bear witness to the truth." However, only those who hungered and thirsted for the truth which Christ came to reveal would hear his voice; they ALONE could ever become his disciples and citizens of his kingdom. With a contemptuous look upon his face, Pilate sneers and then asks a question that has reverberated down through the centuries, "TRUTH? WHAT is truth!"

Being an administrator, Pilate was above all a PRACTICAL man, one whose MAIN concern was in getting things done whether the decision involved money or troops or seeing that his orders were carried out; he held little interest in such abstract, philosophical questions. And because he lacked all interest in such ideals whether they involved matters of truth or love or justice or freedom, it resulted in his failure to recognize THE truth, even when the very EMBODIMENT of it was standing DIRECTLY IN FRONT of him.

Throughout my many years of studying and teaching ethics and philosophy, I've become convinced that there's no more important question than "What is truth?" When you survey the world's greatest literature, almost all of it was inspired by someone's search for ultimate truth. However, I've ALSO learned that the answer to such a question can't simply be found through

intellectualism alone, that is, by analyzing the writings and ideas of history's greatest thinkers and their ideas. The halls of academia are filled with teachers who demonstrate great intellectual curiosity about most everything, but when confronted with the TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL, they turn their backs on it.

When I was in college and also in seminary, my friends and I would argue for hours such questions as the creation of the world, life after death, how history would eventually end, and what in the Bible was true and what was not. Not that these aren't important questions- they ARE, but when I look back to our debates over such controversies, I realize now that rather than concerned about truth, we were MORE concerned about winning arguments and showing just how clever or imaginative our answers could be. No, the reality is that the answer to the question "What is truth?" cannot be found through human reasoning alone, DESPITE all the books and treatises one might read on the subject.

Well, if truth isn't necessarily found by sitting at the feet of the masters and by reading the world's great books, where then CAN truth be found? The answer is given to us in our text this morning- it is found in JESUS CHRIST ALONE, he who not only bears witness to the truth but IS HIMSELF the truth. Regarding the great issues of history and science, Jesus can provide for us very little guidance, but regarding the GREAT and FINAL and AUTHORITATIVE questions concerning God and the soul and of life and death, his word is FINAL. He revealed the truth in his words and WAS the truth in his very being, a truth that was STAMPED upon his character, WITNESSED to in his ministry, and ULTIMATELY TESTIFIED TO by his willingness to embrace that cross.

The scriptures completely alter what we have traditionally understood to be as "true." Truth is not merely a doctrine or object of abstract thought or intellectual curiosity as the philosophers would define it. Statements may be true or false and people may embrace certain truths or not, but the idea that one IS the truth is TOTALLY REVOLUTIONARY. Three times in John's gospel, Jesus speaks of himself as the "True One." He says he is the TRUE VINE, in contrast to Israel which proved to be the false vine; he is the TRUE BREAD which satisfies the soul in contrast to the manna in the wilderness which only fed the Israelite's stomachs; and that he is the TRUE LIGHT which illumines both the heart and conscience in contrast to the feeble lights generated by men. When Jesus says that HE is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," he is indicating that in HIM is the true, the genuine, the ULTIMATE reality, and that in and through HIM and HIM ALONE is God made manifest- God unveiled in human form for all the world to see. If we say his teachings are true, it is not because THEY are the truth but because they are a mirror EXPRESSING the truth which he HIMSELF IS. The same may be said of all our precious church doctrines and Christian confessions and EVEN THE BIBLE ITSELF- if they can be said to be true, it is not because THEY are the truth but because they point back to the one who IS the very embodiment of truth itself- JESUS CHRIST.

Friends, the implications of this are crucial. If Jesus Christ is THE truth, then this means we can never POSSESS the truth but rather the truth possesses US! We come to know the truth only when we encounter the person of Christ and then open our hearts to receive him. It can't be emphasized enough, that truth is not a proposition that can either be believed or doubted but instead a MEETING, a GENUINE ENCOUNTER with Jesus Christ HIMSELF whom we can either SUBMIT ourselves to or EMPHATICALLY RESIST.

Thinking they POSSESSED the truth was the gravest mistake the JEWS made. They

looked to their laws and customs and traditions; they claimed Abraham as their Father and had Solomon's Temple to worship in. They were convinced that they HAD ultimate truth, and because they believed they "possessed" it, they became proud and vain in their imaginings, distorting the truth for their own advantage. Instead of knowing the truth and being made free, they used it to TYRANNIZE and IMPRISON those who disagreed with them.

Similarly, throughout much of history, the church has ALSO viewed itself as the guardian of truth and as a result has often become an ENEMY of Christian freedom. During the Great Inquisition, the Catholic Church condemned and tortured those who refused to conform to THEIR understanding of truth, while the Puritans of Massachusetts stamped out all dissent and drove from their community any who might disagree with THEM. In our OWN day, there are denominations which, not unlike the Taliban, require strict doctrinal adherence. They would purge those ministers and members from their rolls whose lifestyles or interpretation of the truth may be slightly different from what they considered to be "pure" or "orthodox." What each of these failed to understand was that GOD HIMSELF as revealed through his Son, Jesus Christ, WAS the truth and not some principle or doctrine revealed in a book. Truth is not something WE possess, but something that possesses US and as such, we can only KNOW this truth when we abide in a loving and trusting relationship WITH God.

Furthermore, we learn of this truth, not by studying or reading about it but only by DOING it. Jesus said that if any would DO his will, he shall then KNOW the truth, whether it be of God or of man. We discover the truth only when we live in the reality of the one who PERSONIFIED truth, by participating in his being when he approaches us. As the great British preacher Frederick W. Robertson declared from his pulpit over a hundred and fifty years ago: "Who is a true man? He who DOES the truth; and never holds a principle on which he is not prepared in any hour to act, and in any hour to risk the consequences of holding it."

If the truth cannot be possessed but only received or welcomed by us as we open ourselves up to Christ when he comes to us, and if this truth can only be grasped and learned by DOING it, a third implication is that if we receive him when he comes to us and we allow him to live his life through us so that HIS love becomes OUR love, then we demonstrate that the truth of Christ is IN US as well. Jesus represented pure, unconditional love, and when that same love is expressed through our OWN words and deeds, then we prove to the rest of the world that we live in the reality of HIS truth. Love--CHRIST'S love--becomes the ONLY standard, the ONLY criterion by which truth can be measured. Thus, you can always tell if someone knows and stands in the truth- if they love EVEN AS CHRIST HIMSELF did.

Friends, you may have guessed by now that the one ACTUALLY on trial was NEVER Jesus, but the Roman governor over the region, PONTIUS PILATE. Similarly, we find OURSELVES in that SAME judgment hall this very morning where WE stand face-to-face with Christ, where WE--like Pilate--are the ones now on trial. And for WHAT? We come to church each week where we sing the hymns and recite the prayers and respectfully listen to a carefully crafted sermon; we pay our tithes, serve on a committee when asked, and support whatever mission project is being promoted that day. But as we have seen, one can say the right things and engage in all the correct rituals without ever caring one whit about the truth--what it means and our relation to it. The fact is that if we're not passionate about Jesus Christ, if we've never seriously asked OURSELVES, "What is the truth?" then the reality is that we are no better than Pontius Pilate was. And if in our heart of hearts, we are not concerned about

TRUTH, then neither will we ever be concerned about any OTHER ideal whether it be JUSTICE or FREEDOM or even LOVE.

However, the GOOD news is that if we ARE sincere, then God promises to guide us into all truth. He'll help us to discover that the truth does not ultimately reside in any book of philosophy or church creed, not in any Christian denomination nor even between the pages of our Bible. Oh they may point us TOWARD the truth but they are NOT the truth- THAT can only be found in an ENCOUNTER and SUBSEQUENT RELATIONSHIP with none other than JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF. And though we might not understand the answer ENTIRELY, that's all right for by simply taking that first step and ASKING the question, it shows that we are ALREADY on the way to freedom and wholeness. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, forgive us for being so concerned with the cares of our daily lives that we forget how important it is to keep our eyes fixed on you and the larger picture before us. You grant us the capability to ask such an important question as "what is truth," a question which the animal world can never ask much less understand. Yet we reveal ourselves to be no better than the animals when we show such little interest in the answer you provide. Help us to see how "love"--CHRIST'S love--becomes the ONLY standard, the ONLY criterion by which truth can be measured. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

As someone who entered college a half-century ago as a philosophy major, during those first few years I explored any number of religions and philosophies in an effort to learn the answer to the question "What is truth?"- the SAME question Pilate had cynically posed to Jesus in his judgement hall two millennia ago, I only began to discover the answer once I met Jesus Christ and heard him speak to ME those same words he told his Jewish critics--those smug religious leaders who were confident they already KNEW the truth and stood squarely upon it-- "If you hold to my teaching... THEN you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."