



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

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What is Truth?

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

August 12, 2012

"Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors.." Relationships thrive when people trust each other, when they can count on the integrity of what someone says or does. When dishonesty enters the arena, many things are damaged – harmony, the ability to work together,. Even the suspicion of dishonesty is harmful. Teaching children the importance of honesty is a big part of parenting. It must be modeled. It must be nurtured with appropriate correction when necessary. Stories like The Boy who cried Wolf are used for instruction. My Dad used to say, "If a man tells the truth one hundred times and lies just once, he is not known as John the Truth Teller." A reputation for dishonesty is difficult to overcome.

So today's scripture that calls us be truthful in our relationships is a good reminder observe the commandment against bearing false witness, but there is a great difference between not lying and the truth. "What is truth?" These cynical words spoken by Pilate as he interrogated Jesus are more authentic than are usually acknowledged. It is a question that should be asked often. Truth is a concept that flows through our lives and our faith and yet it is nearly impossible to even define. The Oxford Dictionary defines *truth* as the "quality or state of being true." How helpful is that! Likewise, *true* is defined as "in accordance with fact or reality." There are lots of synonyms for these words; veracity, accuracy, authenticity as well as sincere, dependable and faithful. All good words but none of them really gets to the root of Pilate's question. What is it?

In the Old Testament, there is no distinct word for truth. All of the references to it swim around reliability and something that can stand up to testing. For the Hebrews, truth was moral and relational, not intellectual. Truth was something that one believed in. But by the time of Jesus, the concept of truth was seen through a Greek lens, that is an intellectual one. Truth was something to be known, not merely trusted. The apostle Paul managed to use both the Greek and Hebrew ideas when writing about truth. It is something reliable, to be obeyed, the opposite of malice and evil. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I am the truth." As the revealer of God, Jesus embodies truth. And yet, I feel we are still held by Pilate's question. What is truth?

I spent the week chasing truth and came to realize that it is like the Chinese concept of the *Tao*, which is one of those untranslatable ideas akin to the "way" or the "path." Sounds familiar. It signifies the fundamental essence or nature of the universe. Lao-tzu said of the Tao, some 500 years before Jesus, "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name." The Greeks would probably call it the Logos – that which became flesh in Jesus. As I pursued Truth, I began to feel as though I were being spun

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around. It began to feel like looking for the Pleiades in the summer sky, it can be seen better if you don't look directly at it. How mysterious.

So I decided to look at what wise people have said about truth. Joseph Joubert, an 18th century French thinker starts us off with this, "Truth consists of having the same idea about something that God has." Blaise Pascal, another French voice said, "Once your soul has been enlarged by a truth, it can never return to its original size." Gandhi restated that with, "When you know the truth, the truth makes you a soldier."

Novelist Herman Hesse observed, "The truth has a million faces, but there is only one truth." This turns us in a direction that we must go in our pursuit of Truth. Two quote bring us to the dangerous but necessary place of relativism. Marcus Aurelius, Roman philosopher and Emperor, not long after the days of Jesus said, "Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth." His thoughts would be echoed in the 19th century by Gustav Flaubert, "There is no truth. There is only perception."

Some distinctions must be made. In our day to day lives, there are things that are true and consistent. The laws of the universe, like gravity and the speed of light, are as true as anything we can find. The orbit of the planet gives us morning and daytime and nighttime and then repeats. These are not things about which one has an opinion, they are merely true. However, when the element of human observation and interpretation is introduced, things become relative. Cultural norms play into what is right and good. Religious thought and doctrines influence what people experience as true. What is true in one culture or religion is not necessarily true in another. We can acknowledge and respect that or we can try to convince ourselves that we alone know the truth.

In human relationships, co-existence requires a measure of relativism – culture does determine norms at some level. However the world can come together and say "the time of slavery is passed. It is no longer acceptable." Child sacrifice was a part of the cultures of the ancient near east, the world has since determined that that is morally repugnant. Polygamy was the norm; in the US it is now a crime. The need for a measure of relativism exists because human culture must have time to evolve. Moral relativism develops as humans interact; it emerges and self-corrects versions of the truth.

However, the "what is truth?" question still seeks something beyond. Religions often claim to have sole custody of Truth. But religion is a human construction that seeks to understand a mystery. Religion is people coming together in pursuit of meaning and purpose and Truth. It is dangerous when faiths claim to being the only way to know God. Wars are fought over less. Vigilance is required to make distinctions between eternal truths that shine through and doctrines that claim ultimate answers.

When Jesus and Pilate had their conversation, Pilate asked his question and Jesus did not provide him with an answer, at least not in words. Jesus' claim to the truth is upheld in what follows. Given Jesus' skill with words and debate, he could have talked his way out of his execution but he did not. He understood that God's truth could not be expressed in words, but

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only in an example of self-giving, self-sacrificing love. That is what is revealed in Jesus' execution at the hands of a violent Empire and an angry religious establishment. Jesus was willing to die so that God's truth might be revealed. The truth that love is stronger than death, love is stronger than fear. Love and truth are one.

Living in truth and love requires constant vigilance, constant evaluation of the things that we believe and the things that we claim. There is a human desire for certainty; our brains are made that way. So we must be wary of assuming that the things that make us feel right and safe are ultimately the truth. We should not be deceived into thinking that a glimpse of the Truth is indeed the whole truth. Our pursuit must begin and end in humility. Ralph Waldo Emerson said that "Truth is the property of no individual, but is the treasure of all."

The reason that I am a Christian is because I find that I learn the most about ultimate Truth from the life, teachings, and example of Jesus, the one who answered the question "What is truth?" with his death which revealed the truth of the power of love and life.

Tell the truth to your neighbors, yes. Pursue the truth and you will discover the purpose of your life. Clarence Darrow said, "The pursuit of Truth will set you free, even if you never catch up with it."

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