

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

April 7, 2023

Truth

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A lot of conflict arises out of either miscommunication or misunderstanding. I'm sure you have experienced this at some time or another. Sometimes it's no big deal, we realize that we weren't as clear as we ought to be, or we come to see what someone else was trying to communicate in a different way. Sometimes though, it is a big deal. Sometimes, it's a matter of life and death.

There is a lot of this sort of conflict in the Passion accounts of the Gospels. Now, it sure seems as though most, if not all, of this conflict was unavoidable as it involved political and religious systems of power protecting themselves. And that is what such systems tend to do best. But there is still a lot we can learn by examining the miscommunication and misunderstanding behind all of the conflict.

Perhaps one of the most important misunderstandings at work here in John's account of the Passion has to do with truth. This is not the first time this concept has been lifted up in this Gospel.¹ John seems very concerned with truth (he references truth 10 times more than any other Gospel) ...but what does truth mean to John? What does it mean for Jesus in John's Gospel? What about truth as a universal? There's a lot to explore around truth in this Gospel.

Truth gets introduced right in the prologue (the first 18 verses of John): "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and **truth**...The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and **truth** came through Jesus Christ."² But it is also a consistent theme throughout the rest of the Gospel too. And almost every single time truth is mentioned in this Gospel we find it being closely

¹ c.f. John 1:14, 17; 4:23-24; 5:33; 8:31-46; 14:6, 17; 15:26; 16:7, 13; 17:8, 17-19; 18:37-38; 19:35

² John 1:14, 17

linked with the person of Jesus. This is laid out perfectly in John 14 where Jesus plainly states, "I am the way and the **truth** and the life."³

Now, if you're like me you might struggle a bit with the idea that truth is embodied in a person. To our western minds truth is primarily propositional, it's a statement more than anything else. Water is wet, that is true. We need air to survive, that is true as well. The sun is a mass of incandescent gas...that is also true. All statements of truth expressed as propositions. So we are well in line with Pontius Pilate with this focus for our understanding of truth.

"What is truth?" Pilate asks in response to Jesus. We can certainly echo that query today! It wasn't that long ago that Stephen Colbert introduced America to the concept of "truthiness," which he defined as something that sounds true but is not based on logic or fact. Then there's the rise in recent years of misinformation, propaganda, and all sorts of accusations of "fake news" and conspiracies.

Roughly two thousand years later and we're still struggling with truth! This goes to show where a primarily propositional understanding of truth can get you. People can look at the same object or witness the same act, describe it with completely truthful propositions and arrive at totally different conclusions. There is a Buddhist parable that illustrates humanity's struggle with truth, especially propositional truth, you may have heard it before, but please bear with me:

A group of blind men heard that a strange animal, called an elephant, had been brought to the town, but none of them were aware of its shape and form. Out of curiosity, they said: "We must inspect and know it by touch, of which we are capable". So, they sought it out, and when they found it they groped about it. The first person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said, "This being is like a thick snake". For another one whose hand reached its ear, it seemed like a kind of fan. As for another person, whose hand was upon its leg, said, the elephant is a pillar like a tree-trunk. The blind man who placed his hand upon its side said the elephant, "is a wall". Another who felt its tail, described it as a rope. The last felt its tusk, stating the elephant is that which is hard, smooth and like a spear.⁴

³ John 14:6

⁴ "Ud 6:4 Sectarians (1) (Tittha Sutta)". *suttacentral.net*.

This parable is often used to point out how religions can never fully grasp the entirety of God, which explains why there are so many of them! But at its most fundamental it shows how propositional truth can be very limited. And ultimately, it shows how humans are complex and messy creatures with limited understanding of the world around us. I think it also reveals how that limited understanding is greatly shaped by our context and experience. Would that last blind man have describe the tusk as a spear if he had never felt a spear before?

Pilate asks, "What is truth?" And no wonder! Truth is difficult and can really cause conflict! But Jesus has given him, and us, the answer to that already. The author of John's Gospel has been consistently pointing it out to us in a myriad of different ways. To understand Jesus' answer though, we need to see that Jesus has a different definition and approach to truth. Mainly, Jesus is not talking about propositional truth, rather he is inviting us to grapple with relational truth.

Given that there is no truly neutral party that can make absolutely true propositional statements, we must then consider our relationship with whatever we see as true. This is called the "observer effect" in physics, made famous by Schrödinger's cat thought experiment. We cannot escape the web of relationships we exist in, and we must approach the idea of truth from that perspective. Ultimately, we are acknowledging that reality is not subjective, but WE ARE! And our own subjectivity means we will find truth in the midst of our relationships with the world around us.

When it comes to the truth of God, that is the ultimate relational truth. Being understood means someone seeing the truth of you. Understanding someone else means seeing the truth of them. But we cannot truly understand one another without loving one another. Pursuing relational truth is in act of seeking understanding...it is an act of profound love. God came to earth in Jesus Christ in order to show us this truth. To show us that God sees the truth of us.

Relational truth is what is found when those blind men start sharing their understanding with one another. It requires a willingness to not only share your understanding, but also a willingness to hear an other's understanding too. Relational truth acknowledges context, complexity, and nuance. Relational truth, therefore, is inherently communal.

Let me put this another way. Propositional truth allows us to feel RIGHT. Relational truth allows us to feel LOVED and UNDERSTOOD. Humanity generally seems to prefer the former over the latter, which is too bad because we need to feel loved and understood far more than we need to feel right.

Jesus regularly sees people, understands them, accepts them, and loves them. Walking the Way of Christ means following that example. But relational truth is not just for communities of people! It goes for the rest of creation too. If we see the world around us, seek to understand it, we will love it better. Relational truth would lead us to taking better care of the environment. It would mean taking better care of one another too. Ultimately it means we are more concerned for the “other” than we are for ourselves. No wonder we nailed Jesus to a cross for suggesting such a self-less Way of living!

What is truth, Pilate? It’s standing right in front of you, loving you even as you condemn it. What truth is standing in front of you? Will you see it? See them? Seek to understand it? Understand them? Will you love it? Love them? Truth is loving and life-giving. Truth is transformative and reconciling. Truth is love, and what is unloving and life-destroying *simply is not truth*. Amen.