

“What Is Truth?” Sermon Series
“Part I: Introduction and Overview”
August 25, 2019 – SELC – Pastor Mark Perry

John 18 describes Jesus standing before Pontius Pilate, and saying, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” To which Pilate responds by asking, “What is truth?” (v. 38).

What is truth? That’s a question for our age, isn’t it? With all the accusations and criticisms flying back and forth about what’s really true, who’s telling the truth, who’s exaggerating, embellishing or fabricating “truth,” it can be really challenging to know who or what to believe. And we can despair because we need to know what is real and what is not in order to make important, sometimes life-changing or life-risking decisions.

Then we hear about “relativism,” a term for the philosophy that one viewpoint or belief is just as valid as any other viewpoint. It’s prevalent in many college classrooms and in many conversations in our pluralistic society. How can there be just one truth for all when there are so many different religions, cultures and beliefs around us today? Or, at least that’s the question asked by many.

In this place we find ourselves today, many of us may indeed wonder along with Pilate, “What is truth?” Phyllis Tickle names it in a slightly different way in her book The Great Emergence. She says that the question for our time and for our church in this time is “Where now is the Authority?”

And we may marvel that Jesus apparently just stands there in silence after asking that question, giving no answer.

Except, of course, he is silent because his very person is the answer. We know and believe that he IS the answer to that question. That he already addressed it when, in John Chapter 14 Jesus says, “I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life.” We worship, follow and serve the One who IS the most important, most powerful and most saving Truth we could ever know. This should bring comfort and assurance, if we believe it, as we work to sort out all other “truths” to which people lay claim.

Now, before I go any further, I want to acknowledge that calling *Jesus* the truth is a *bit* different than, say, calling the Law of Gravity the *truth*, or $1 + 1 = 2$. Jesus Christ is a deeper Truth. It is the difference between truth as represented by a *fact* and truth as something that brings *Life*, as Jesus says, in John 10:10, “I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly.”

This difference is reflected in our readings today. In Luke, the leader of the synagogue becomes indignant because Jesus has healed on the Sabbath, which he (and others) would interpret as “doing work.” Now, it is a *fact* that there were laws against working on the sabbath and that *technically* Jesus could have waited until the next day to heal the woman, given the fact it wasn’t an emergency as she had been crippled for 18 years.

However, Jesus was always about getting at the *deeper* Truth of the matter. And, in this instance, compassion triumphs over technicality. Kind of like this sign at Joyce Clark Middle School I saw when picking up our youth for confirmation. [“When given the choice between being right or being kind, choose kind.”] Jesus was acting on the basis of the law of love and justice, as also reflected in Isaiah where it says, “If you remove the yoke from among you, ...if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness ...” A deeper, more powerful, Truth like that can help to understand better how to evaluate and relate the truth-as-facts in our everyday life.

Another example of applying this could be in what is today perceived by many as a clash between Creation and Evolution. The broad consensus in the scientific community is that evolution is an established fact. (I’ll talk on September 22nd about scientific theories and facts). But how do we square that with the revealed Truth we believe that God created the world? Are these contradictory and conflicting truths? Are they equal but different truths? Can we hold both “truths” at the same time, as the ELCA teaches?

These are the kind of questions and challenges that I’m hoping to address in this sermon series through the month of September. What is it about our Christian Truth- the deeper Truth- that can help us evaluate and respond to other truths in our lives- the facts, if you will- that we live in and by each and every day? How might it help us to see where now IS the authority in our lives and in our faith?

To help us do that, I’m going to use a classic theological “test” of whether or not something is authoritative. It is called the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” named after the great Methodist church leader, John Wesley. Some of you may have heard of this before. We all probably have applied it sometime in our lives. once you hear what it is about and recognize it.

In his Hein-Fry Lecture of 2006, Herbert Chilstrom, first Bishop of the ELCA and a guest here in 2010, said, “The Methodists, our new (at the time) partners in full communion, have a longtime process that is known as the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” though surely not embraced by all Methodists, many find it useful. As the title implies, it involves four steps:

First and foremost, we should ask what the **Bible** has to say about a particular question.

Second, we should inquire about the **tradition** of the church.

Third, we should use the gift of **reason**.

Finally, we should look at the **experience** of believers.”

The Bible (or scripture), Tradition (of the Church), Reason and Experience (or Inspiration), with Scripture, of course, being paramount. Four criteria that can be

applied to help us understand better what and who we should listen to when it comes to faith, but, I believe, also can be applied to other questions of authority. It is at the juncture of all these where we can more likely discover the truth (point out the center).

In this study, I'm also going to explore and expand on the idea, first suggested by Ambrose, the Fourth Century Church "Doctor," who said, "If it's true, it is always from the one Holy Spirit." (quoted by Thomas Aquinas in *De Veritate*, q. 1, a. 8. Also *Summa Theologia I-II*, q. 109, a. 1, ad 1).

Over the next month, (excluding September 8th, when we have our Hymn Fest and no sermon), we will define, explore, and apply these four criteria to the challenge of discerning fact from fiction, data from propaganda, profundity from puffery, and shallow truth from deeper, lasting Truth with a capital "T." I can't promise that I'll be able to give answers to all the questions we may have about that challenge but I hope and pray, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that we'll have a better understanding about how to follow Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life, in a complex, complicated and often contradictory world. And, I'm going to have the texts of these sermons available to pick up and read, in case you miss a sermon or want to study more what was said.

The truth should matter to us. It matters because we worship and serve the One who calls Himself "the Truth." It matters because Jesus lived his life pointing to deeper and more powerful truths, even though it was part of the reason he was killed. It matters because there are millions of people out there who think Christians don't use their minds and intellects in any disciplined thoughtful way when, really, we do! It matters because, like this woman who was set free of her burdens, we are called to help others experience and know how, if you follow Him, "you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. (John 8:31-32)." Amen.

