

The Already, Not Yet Church
The Preservation of the Truth
John 18:33-38
First Presbyterian Church
March 27, 2022

Introduction

Our spiritual grandparents have bequeathed to us some words about the church. They aren't familiar words to many of us, but they are important and substantive words which seek to articulate what the church is really for. Taken together, they are called the Great Ends of the Church. In past weeks, we have focused on: the proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind... the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God... and the maintenance of divine worship. This morning we come to the fourth Great End – the Preservation of the Truth.

Prayer for Illumination

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. Amid all the changing words of our generation, speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

John 18:33-38

³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” ³⁷Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. 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.” ³⁸Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

Sermon

This sermon has two main points. The first is that the truth... and the telling of the truth is essential for human community. Whether in our family... among friends... in our workplace... or as a nation... without truth-telling trust erodes/ and communities fall apart. And second point of this sermon is that the church is called to be in the “truth-business” ... that one of the great purposes of the church... one of the reasons the church exists... is the preserving... the keeping fresh of the truth. George Washington’s father had a beloved cherry tree. It was chopped down, for some reason or another. When confronted, young George responded, “I cannot tell a lie; I chopped down the cherry tree.” It’s a wonderful story. We all heard it as children. But historians tell us it is apocryphal. In other words: the story we tell to encourage truth-telling is not factually true. So why do we tell it?¹

¹ Rev. Tom Are, Jr. in “Preservation of the Truth” - a sermon preached at Village Church (PCUSA), Kansas City, September 26, 2021. Used by permission.

Well, one reason we've already heard – we know that telling the truth is essential to community. Without truth-telling there can be no trust... and when folks don't trust each other, communities fall apart. You may remember from the Book of Exodus how God was trying to form a bunch of recently freed Hebrew slaves into a community that could eventually be a blessing to all people. And so, God gives them the Ten Commandments which was God's way of saying, "Look, I have just freed you from slavery, let me tell you how to stay free." And one of the commandments is: "You shall not bear false witness."² Truth is the ligament that holds communities together. And so, it should not surprise us that the Christian faith – a faith that is rooted in love for neighbor – in community - should be concerned with the preservation of the truth.

Which I THINK most of you will agree is getting more and more difficult these days. We read just a moment ago how Jesus stood before Pilate... how he said that he had come into the world to testify to the truth... and how Pilate had asked him, "What is truth?" Well, as soon as WE hear that question in OUR day, it seems that time just collapses between the first century and the twenty-first... and Pilate's voice sounds eerily similar to our post-modern, conspiracy-theory-laden culture's voice, perhaps similar even to our voice.³

What IS Truth? It's hard to know in these days of alternative facts and competing realities. Most of you have heard what former senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said, everyone is entitled to [their] own opinions, but not to [their] own facts." At the time, most folks probably agreed with the senator. But I'm not sure most do now. Today people think that they can create their own facts... and from those facts they create their own truth. I don't want to sound like the old guy pining for a time long ago... but today, more and more people seem to believe that whatever they decide the truth is, is true... regardless of the facts. And the evidence of that... (going back to the importance of truth-telling for human relationships in community...) the evidence of that is seen in the extreme polarization and divisiveness that marks our communal life today. While each one of these Great Ends needs to be translated and reimagined for our day and time, this fourth one calls us to a standard that is truly counter-cultural.

Jesus himself didn't speak much about truth except in the Gospel of John. You remember it was said OF HIM in the first chapter: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us... full of grace and truth."⁴ Then, in the eighth chapter, Jesus tells a group of followers, "If you make your home in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."⁵ Of course, we hear about truth in the very familiar 14th chapter when he says to his disciples, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."⁶ And finally, we hear the word truth again in today's passage: a passage describing the confrontation between Jesus and Pontius Pilate as Jesus is taken to trial before the crucifixion.

Pilate: "So, then, you are a king?"

Jesus: "You are the one saying I am a king."

² Exodus 20:16

³ Rev. Shannon Kershner in her sermon "The Preservation of the truth," preached to Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL., October 4, 2020.

⁴ John 1:14

⁵ John 8:32

⁶ John 14:6

The whole reason I was born and the whole reason I came into the world is to bear witness to the truth.”

Pilate: “What is truth?”⁷

What’s really interesting... is that at that moment when Pilate asks, “What is truth?” Jesus just stands there... completely silent. Well, there’s a sense, isn’t there, that in our day and age we are still standing in that silence, waiting for Jesus’ answer... waiting for him to tell us what the truth is.⁸ St. Augustine says that human beings are “ravished with love for the truth.” In other words, to be human is to be curious and ask all kinds of questions: Who are we? Is there a God? What is of highest value? What can we hope for? What should we do? According to the Enlightenment philosopher, Descartes, the only reliable starting point for finding answers to these questions – for finding truth – is the self... the individual. “I think, therefore I am,” he famously said. Before... before the Enlightenment, truth was defined by tradition... by conviction... by belief. But Descartes taught us that truth—capital “T” Truth - is only found in that which is factually true... that which can be known by the self through the senses and logically deduced through reason. But here’s the thing: for all the good things Enlightenment has brought us, it has limits – and truth coming only from facts is not the only way we can know something is true. For instance, the Enlightenment taught us to speak of the science of evolution – that’s a factual conversation. But a factual conversation will not speak of creation... certainly not creation by a good and loving God... because that is a conversation that is larger than the facts. Another example: Jesus stands before Pilate and soon will be tortured and crucified. These are the facts... and they are important. But knowing these facts is not enough. For unless you could see beyond the facts and know that in this suffering, dying man the love of God was redeeming the world, you won’t see what was really happening. That’s the truth with a capital T... that’s the whole truth. And the whole truth is too big to squeeze into facts.⁹

So, we know some things by fact. But we also know some things by walking a different path... the path of conviction... the path of faith. And that path leads us to the “truth” that this fourth great end of the church calls us to preserve... for us, Truth with a capital T is not discovered in facts derived from the power of reason, but in a person. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Remember earlier when I mentioned Jesus’ words to his disciples the night before he was crucified. Literally, they are: “I am . . . truth.” Literally translated, he said: “I am way, I am truth, and I am life.” Not truth in this or that doctrine *about* me... or this or that image *of* me. Evangelical or conservative Christianity is not the truth... neither is liberal or progressive Christianity. Christianity itself is not the truth. Jesus simply says, “I am truth.” So, that the truth we are called to discover is found in a person - Jesus of Nazareth... who is the central character in a story about how the God of the cosmos, the Eternal Word, came down to us creatures AS a fellow creature, born in a cold and smelly manger, during a cruel time, into an insignificant town, located in a mighty empire that would set out to destroy him. The truth that we, as church, are called to keep fresh is this affirmation God would choose to empty God’s self of power and grandeur in order to pitch a tent among us in Jesus of Nazareth.

⁷ John 18:37-38

⁸ Kershner draws on a sermon by the late K. C. Ptomey, longtime pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN.

⁹ Are, again.

Furthermore, that the God of all powers and principalities, of all creatures great and small, of east and west and north and south, of all the galaxies known and unknown - this God chose to do this because, as Dorothy Sayers once wrote, "God was not content to call creation good from a distance." And the truth that motivated "God'-Truth-in-flesh" is that it was all done for the sake of love. It was all done out of a desire for relationship with us... out of a holy longing to show us how God feels about the world, how God's heart yearns for this world - how God loves you and me everyone else.¹⁰

It has become our practice over the past several years, whenever we baptize an infant, to walk the child among us and say words that actually come from the French Reformed Church... and one part goes something like this: For you, little child, Jesus Christ has come, he has fought, he has suffered. For you he entered the shadow of Gethsemane and the horror of Calvary. For you he uttered the cry, "It is finished!" For you he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven and there he intercedes — for you, little child... even though you do not know it. But in this way the word of the Gospel becomes true. "We love him, because he first loved us."

That is the Truth, with a capital T, that we are invited, called, given, to preserve, to keep fresh, so that that children of every age will have the chance to encounter it... to encounter HIM, the Living Word, the One who is Way... and is Truth... and is Life. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁰ Adapted from Shannon Kershner's sermon which draws significant inspiration from Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Augsburg Fortress, 1998).