

“What is Truth?”

Mark 4:26-34

June 18, 2006

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor
Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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²⁶He also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Prayer.

What is truth?

We live in an age where truth appears to be elusive. It turns out there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, neither was there a connection between Saddam and Al Q’adea. We are told that the Enron Corporation followed established accounting principles. We’ve been assured that FEMA acted with all possible haste to respond to the victims of Katrina. Roman Catholic bishops report that they follow procedures that are in the best interest of the children in their care.¹

What is truth? Plato inquired of his students.

“I’ll get that paperwork right over to you,” a less-than-reliable colleague promises. “Yea, right,” we cynically whisper under our breath. “When hell freezes over.” We are told that our taxes will be cut while at the same time we will receive more services. We are told that the newest and latest educational efforts will ensure that all children can and will earn a regents diploma and that no child gets left behind. We are told that the way to riches is simply “a dollar and a dream.”

What is truth? Plato said we could know truth if we could sublimate our minds to their original purity.²

It is my observation that the more we are subjected to the relativistic half-truths of the world the more cynical we become. All politicians become liars. All CEOs and members of corporate boards are on the take. All clergy and church officials are predators. All marketing people would surrender their first born to the devil if they could only land one more sale.

¹ With thanks to Elizabeth A. Dreyer, “Truth Matters,” Weavings A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life, XXI (3), May / June 2006. Her reflections largely influence my thoughts and words.

² <http://www.bartleby.com/81/16815.html>

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What is truth? Pilate asks his detained prisoner.

Cynicism breeds the whole grey area of shifting sands, called relativism. Truth is understood in terms of how it relates to other realities. One person's truth may or may not be another person's truth. Absolute truth, the fact from which all other truths proceed and are judged, become as dust in the wind. We can all get along as long as we can tolerate other people's world perspective. But as soon as someone else's understanding of truth collides head on with our sense of truth, well, then we have trouble.

The spurned husband says to Jerry Springer, "My wife and I have always been faithful." To which the stage manager opens the curtains to reveal the alleged adulterous suitor, who smiles and says "That's why she is sleeping with me." And a brawl ensues.

Israel says, "this is where the border is drawn. It was established by David and confirmed by the British in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and by the United Nations in 1948." To which the Palestinian replies, "who was here before Joshua? Who was here before the British? Who was here before the United Nations? What gives you the right to take my home?" And the bullets begin to fly.

What is truth? Pilate asks Jesus.³

An all-to-common reaction to the fluidity of relativism is fundamentalism. Webster identifies fundamentalism as a return to fundamental principles, by rigid adherence to those principles, and often by intolerance of other views and opposition to secularism.⁴ It can be summed up by the bumper sticker that reads "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it!" Fundamentalism stems from natural fears that a person's values, culture, belief, and faith are being threatened.

But there is danger in dividing the world into two camps – one being strict adherence according to my beliefs – and the other being "anything goes," "live and let live," amoral living. Creativity lies in-between. Honest inquiry searches for answers somewhere between these two poles. Diversity has value – political diversity, ethnic diversity, gender diversity – and it is couched in the world between these two extremes.

God didn't create us with the gift of free will and determination so that we could dismiss it, sit back, and allow ourselves to be spoon fed fundamentalism. We aren't mindless dolts, pre-programmed Lemmings set to work by some twisted cosmic manipulator. No! God gives a brain for a reason – to use it! to reason with it! to ask questions! and to go about a quest for answers!

What is truth? Pilate asks Jesus right before he is sentenced to death.

This curious question comes as a response to Jesus 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."⁵ Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to the voice of Jesus. Faithful Christians have been contemplating these words of Jesus for centuries. Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Ávila, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, ... all the great writers and thinkers of Christianity have attempted to wrap themselves around these words of Jesus.

Earlier, Jesus teaches his disciples these words, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life."⁶ Jesus is the

³ John 18:38

⁴ <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/fundamentalism>

⁵ John 18:37

⁶ John 14:6

truth. He is the truth, personified in the world. The gold standard for knowing what is truthful for the Christian is to replace our human discernment with the eyes and ears and mind and heart of Jesus Christ. Substitute the self for Jesus – and your eyes will be opened to see the truth in the world unlike you will have ever witnessed before.

Look through the eyes of Jesus and begin to see people as individuals. I see a CEO who is generous, loving, and kind – who practices environmental stewardship – who carries Jesus in his heart to every business meeting he attends. I see pastors who love their people, politicians who serve their constituents, and bikers who motorcycle for Christ. Place the heart of Christ within you, and experience the passion of Christian disciples – coming from all walks of life – with every possible skin color – from every type of religious upbringing – as we all work together for the completion of the Kingdom of God.

Experience the world as the hands, feet, eyes, ears, mind and heart of Christ, and you will be privy to all the half-truths and lies that abound. Riches lead to happiness. Pornography doesn't hurt anyone. It's ok to use drugs, so long as you don't hurt others. Your life will be so much better if you buy this car or that "what-ever" thing that is bound to change your life. Lies! Lies! And more Lies!

Not because that's what I think. It is truth because Jesus tells us that we are to love others, not take advantage of them or exploit them. Jesus tells us to use our treasures to build up the eternal, not to accumulate that which rusts and decays away. Jesus tells us to place our trust and security in God, and in God alone, not in weapons or power or might.

What is the truth when it comes to matters of God's kingdom? Jesus tells us this morning, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground," the seeds are nurtured by rain, sun, and soil. They grow to maturity and produce abundantly, and then they are harvested.

Now, if your mind doesn't make sense of metaphors, I don't know what I can tell you, because Jesus is teaching in metaphor. He does it to avoid premature arrest and death.

This is the truth regarding today's lesson: The kingdom of God is in a state of growth. It is growing bigger and stronger all the time. Take heart if you look around and feel discouraged about where it appears the world is headed. The world is not headed straight to hell! The world is headed straight to heaven – it may just take a little bit of time for everyone to get there!

Focus instead on the Kingdom; where it's been, where it is at, and anticipate where it is growing. If you're standing idly by, step in and step up to take your share of responsibility for advancing it – one simple bit at a time.

Jesus also tells us that we can compare the Kingdom of God with a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds but one of the largest of bushes. Do not look upon God's Kingdom and underestimate it. That would be a foolish thing to do. The point isn't the size. The point is the potential.

With the almighty power of God, the extravagant love of Jesus Christ, and the unlimited influence of the Holy Spirit, there is nothing that can contain the Kingdom of God. It's potential is without limits.

Potential and growth; what else is necessary to discern the truth about the Kingdom of God? Potential and growth give a sense of hope, of promise, and something good right around the next corner.

When I hear discouragement talk in the church – cutting missions, limiting programs, declining

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congregations, and dysfunctional clergy – I know this isn't talk of the Kingdom. This isn't what builds up the Body of Christ. This isn't the direction that leads to growth – in depth or in size. Avoid engaging in this negative talk, this attitude that is defensive, this posture of criticism.

God's Kingdom is always onward and upward! Every moment is a new moment of creation, a new moment of improvement, and new moment of opportunity. The question that Jesus leaves with all inquiring Christians is "which road will you follow?"

Will you tear down, or will you build up? Will you engage in the sin of the world or will you take part in the redemption of the world as a vital member of the Body of Christ?

Just as the mustard seed grows from the smallest of seeds to become the greatest of bushes, so too are we called to become the potential of God's emerging Kingdom. That Kingdom is breaking out all around us. With the discernment of Christ, opening our eyes to all that is true, all that is left up to us is how we will respond to his call.

Now that's the truth.

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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