

The Gospel Truth

A Sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 13, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:1-7, NRSV)

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you free.” (John 8:31-32, NRSV)

Ever since I was a little boy, I’ve always had a passion for understanding the world and this marvelous universe of which we are a part. My first great love was learning about prehistoric life and the fossils they left behind ... especially *dinosaurs*! The first books I ever read on my own were about them. I read of the vast expanse of geological ages over which life on this planet has lived, and I tried and tried to imagine such lengths of time.

But you could also say that religion was always in my blood. As a young boy, I lost my granddaddy, after just turning 9. Ever since, for almost as long as I can remember, I have been haunted by deeper questions –

Is God real?

What happens when we die?

What is my purpose?

What is true? What is the Truth?

And the Church for me was always that place where those kinds of questions could be asked. They took on an ever-greater urgency as I got older. It sometimes feels like my whole life has been spent in trying to answer them, all in search of *Truth* ... *the Truth* ... what you might call *Truth* with a capital “T.”

Two thousand years ago, Pontius Pilate asked Jesus "What *is* truth?" and for centuries before and after, there have been philosophers, theologians, scientists, politicians, poets, and so on who have tried to answer his question. We human beings have searched for Ultimate Truth for as long as we’ve had the ability to think and the self-awareness to know that we are mortal.

For a few centuries before the New Testament was written, philosophers had been in search of that ultimate Truth which holds everything – material and spiritual and anything else – in the

universe together. The Greeks called it the *Logos*, the “Word.” In our language, its footprints appear in any word that ends in “ology” ... biology (the word on life) ... geology (the word on the earth) ... anthropology (the word on humanity) ... theology (the word on God). And so, to speak of THE *Logos* was to speak of that Word which encompassed everything ... every field of knowledge ... everything Real ... What I referred to two weeks ago as *The Big Picture* ... The *Truth*.

We human beings have attempted many different paths to Ultimate Truth. Some have sought to express it in myth ... others have tried to explain it in great systems of philosophy ... others, to envelop it in the mystery and paradox of religious dogma ... and still others, to discover and test it through science.

Yet through it all, Truth (capital “T”) has proven to be elusive. In fact, the misguided confidence of those who have claimed to have figured it all out has driven many others to conclude that, in fact, *there is no ultimate Truth*, no Big Picture ... only lots of *partial* truths ... *little* pictures.

Our gospel text this morning is perhaps a very familiar one, mostly because it is read and heard so often at funerals, at those times when we are facing that ultimate limit, our own and others’ mortality ... at those times when we are most apt to be asking our own questions of ultimate Truth.

Here, Jesus is gathered with his disciples for the Last Supper. He has washed their feet in a demonstration of humble service and love ... he has warned them of dark days, of his soon-to-come betrayal ... and as a final instruction, he has given them a new commandment, to love one another as he has loved them. This is why, at the beginning of our reading, that he tells them not to let their hearts be troubled ... to believe in God ... to believe in him.

He speaks of a final joy and fellowship beyond the walls of the world and assures them, for all their confusion and despair, that they *do* know the way to that place. Of course, this takes the heart-broken disciples by surprise, for they know perfectly well that they *don’t* know what he’s talking about: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

They don’t recall Jesus ever having spoken of the subject before ... he had written nothing on the layout of the hereafter ... he had drawn no maps of the Great Beyond. He had given no orations on theories of *anything*, and irritatingly answered so many questions with yet another question. All the while, he had led them along a path of speaking good news to the dispossessed, offering healing and hope to the broken, sitting at table and breaking bread with those on the margins. And then, as if it should all make sense, they come to this Last Supper together, with the darkness about to fall, and he washes their feet as a common servant, telling them to love one another.

Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? Jesus, you think you’ve explained this, but you haven’t. You speak of overcoming the world, of overcoming *Death itself*, but that’s all we see before us, and we don’t understand your words any better today than we

did before. You speak of going to your Father, to God, and you tell us that we too have a place there, but we don't even understand why you have to leave. Can you explain *that* one more time?

Or, as Phillip would say in the verses following, *Lord, [just] show us the Father and we will be satisfied*. Tell us what we need to know. Demonstrate your divine power again as a sign that we're not all just fooling ourselves. Spare us all the mystery and speak to us plainly of what is True.

I don't know about you, but I totally get them. I love knowing what I'm stepping into before I take the step. I *like* understanding things. I want to *see* the meaning of the losses I've endured and to face the future with both eyes open. I want to have *answers* to those questions which we all have asked. I want to see with my own eyes. I want to know the *Truth*.

I think that it's this desire to understand, to see things from a higher perspective, that drove me into the ministry in the first place. It started with Granddaddy and it eventually led me years later to the great systems of theology in which the mysteries of life, nature, and matters of the Spirit might all come together. I dedicated myself to the arguments and debates and logic which, I hoped, would lead me to Reason and to Faith, to the *Truth*.

But something funny happened on the way.

Many years ago, I used to be quite enamored of apologetics, that branch of theology concerned with the defense of the faith, and convincingly presenting it in an unbelieving world. I came to know all the rational arguments for the existence of God ... for the historical reliability of the Bible ... for why God allows good people to suffer. In my cerebral ivory tower, I thought I was on my way to *truly* understanding. And then, real life struck, and my intellectual house of cards fell apart.

We think of the Book of Job as that book in the Bible which addresses that greatest of ultimate questions, the problem of suffering. But it doesn't *really* explain anything does it? Job certainly never receives an explanation for why he undeservedly loses everything. He raises his voice of protest to heaven and gets interrogated by so-called friends who assume he must have done something to deserve it. But there is no ultimate explanation coming. And no doubt, we have all been there too in our own ways. We have sought explanations that were not coming. We have raised heart-breaking questions that meet only silence.

Life has a way of breaking our illusions of control ... illusions that we can master its mysteries and understand it all. Those first disciples of Jesus were discovering this too, as they faced the betrayal and death of their beloved friend and teacher. They were hurt and scared and longed for some insight into the Truth ... a Truth that could satisfy their minds and bring peace to their hearts.

Maybe in this respect, even Pontius Pilate wasn't so different. Frederick Buechner once suggested as much. In his little book *Beyond Words*, he wrote: "When Jesus says that he has come to bear witness to the truth, Pilate asks, 'What is truth?' (John 18:38). Contrary to the traditional view that his question is cynical, it is possible that he asks it with a lump in his throat. Instead of truth, Pilate has only expedience. His decision to throw Jesus to the wolves is expedient. Pilate views humankind as alone in the universe with nothing but its own courage and ingenuity to see it through. That is enough to choke up anybody."

The disciples want the Truth. And now, looking into the eyes of Jesus, perhaps Pilate longs for it too. Confronted with the truth of his own life, perhaps even the Roman Procurator was crying out for something more.

Back to the Book of Job, Job's anguished questions certainly meet with no explanations ... but they *are* met ... met with something more: *God's own healing and sustaining presence*. And in that presence, Job is driven to silence, his demands for explanations cease.

As Buechner again put it in his wonderful *Secrets in the Dark*, Job's demand for explanation ceased because then he knew "that even if God gave him [an explanation] that made splendid sense out of all the pain and suffering that had ever been since the world began, it was no longer splendid sense that he *needed*, because with his *own eyes* he had beheld the one who in the end clothed all things – no matter how small or confused or in pain – with his own splendor. And that was more than sufficient."

The witness of scripture is that Ultimate Truth is not finally a matter of argument ... not something that you can think out beforehand or prove on a blackboard. No one has figured out the great riddles of existence, and our faith offers no grand explanations in response to our deepest questions.

Instead, it calls us to a life in deep awareness of God's presence. It calls us to "continue in his word" ... to hear the voice of Jesus and to trust him and to *follow* him on the path of self-giving love into a hurting world, in the faith that doing so will, in time, satisfy the mind and bring peace to the heart.

This is that Gospel truth that those first disciples would discover for themselves. In their upper room moment, they are too scared ... too hurt ... felt too alone to see that their need for explanations would, in time, dissolve ... that the ultimate Truth they had been seeking was always right in front of them, looking at them with his compassionate eyes.

This discovery, this seeing, is the journey of a lifetime – for us too. But fortunately, we have been gifted with guides along the way. Starting next week, our eight "Summer Saints" offer us eight different perspectives on what this continuing in the word ... seeking Truth ... looks like, what it can mean. The Truth will indeed set us free, but along the way it can teach us many different things and meet us in different guises.

- For Kierkegaard, the Truth that matters is not just objective fact, but that which addresses us and seizes us at the core of our being, and gives us something for which we can live and die.
- For Sojourner Truth, born Isabella Baumfree, the Truth is something to *proclaim* with conviction, knowing that it has the power to change the world.
- For John Witherspoon, at least part of the Truth is *self-evident*: that all human beings are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.
- For Emily Dickinson, the Truth is something to be *faced*, and that, in part, means facing our own mortality and making our peace with it.
- For William Henry Sheppard, *speaking* Truth to power – especially uncomfortable or inconvenient truth – is essential to any real justice or reconciliation between peoples.
- For Harper Lee, the Truth is something to *stand up* for, even if one must stand alone against ignorance, bigotry, and hatred.
- In Charles Darwin, the Truth is bigger than what we've always been told it is and offers us the gift of new ways of conceiving the Creation, and with it, the sacred dimension of all life.
- And finally, for Katherine Johnson, the Truth is what we are to pursue day in and day out, with or without notice or accolades, and what – in both a literal and spiritual sense – will finally “get us there.”

We have much to learn from each of these men and women, as we walk the journey and live into the Truth in our own time. And along the path, there have been and will be many times that we join our voices with all who have gone before, saying, in effect, *Lord, we don't understand ... We do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?*

I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.

To the glory of God. Amen.