

Searching for the Truth  
Matthew 17:1–8      2 Peter 1:16–21

Do you know that, on average, a person will tell 88,000 lies in a lifetime? If you do the math, that comes out to about four times a day for the typical person. But before you start figuring whether or not you're typical, know that the research included all the "little" lies and partial truths we tell — the times when someone greets you with, "Hi, how are you?" And you answer, "Fine!" whether or not things are actually fine right then. Or when someone produces a picture of their brand new baby, and all you can truthfully say is, "My, what a baby!" but we lie a little and say, "How cute!" So I guess we all contribute at least a little to that statistic.

I came across this surprising tidbit of information on the web a couple of weeks ago. It comes from the UK, but I'm assuming our American culture is enough like the British to say that we can identify. Most of us do not lie outright, though it's possible more of that goes on than I realize. Certainly, we are aware of the lying that has brought down leaders in business, entertainment and politics; we seem to be reading about someone newly found out every day. Investments are lost, careers ruined, futures damaged, and with it all is the loss of trust.

### **The Question of Truth**

The question of truth is facing us constantly — *many* more than 88,000 times in our lives.

It comes to us at work and school, in conversations, while watching TV or reading a magazine.

In this presidential election year, we're especially inundated with information about this political party or that, one candidate or another. One person says the economy is on the verge of recession and another says there are signs of growth. One person says the democratization of Iraq is progressing and another says the war will go on for a decade or more.

The church, too, is not without questions of truth. From televangelists to popular mega-church leaders, from large church to small church, in all denominations, including our own, there have been issues of human frailty and fallacy. The truth has not always been made clear, and so trust erodes. Rumors spread and half-truths are told.

The questions of truth lie in our personal relationships, our values, the promises we make, and ultimately in our faith.

### **The Truth about Jesus**

The disciples of Jesus, and even his detractors, were on the search for the truth — the truth about Jesus.

The account of the Transfiguration of Jesus is an answer to that search. The event takes place in the midst of his ministry, as he begins to tell the disciples of his coming death and resurrection. It must have been difficult for the disciples to believe what he was saying. Great things had been happening — crowds were following them wherever they went with Jesus, they heard him teach and saw him perform miracles. They had been there when he fed more than 5000 people. Who was this Jesus?

For three of his disciples — Peter, James and John — the truth about Jesus was made clear. Jesus chose the three of them to go with him to the top of the mountain, and there they saw him become dazzling white; Moses and Elijah appeared to talk with him. And the three disciples knew. They were there to experience the truth. Would others believe them?

That was the question and is the question: who will believe? Years after the death and resurrection, people had to depend on the word of those who had actually seen and been with Jesus; and as time passed, they had to depend on the word of those who had been taught by the ones who had known Jesus. And so the transfiguration was told and passed on.

For Christians, the transfiguration is enlightening; it shows the truth of Jesus and the love of God in a very convincing way. We weren't there, and we may not expect to experience first-hand such a display of God's presence, but we still want to know the truth.

We want to know the truth about life; we want to know what is certain and dependable, real and right. So, how do we know the truth about anything?

### **Five Ways of Knowing the Truth**

I want to suggest four, actually five, ways of making judgments about falsehood or truth, five ways that come from the Bible. Two we have already touched on: direct experience and a trustworthy authority.

#1

Experience is what three of the disciples had at the Transfiguration; it's what all of the disciples had as they shared in Jesus' ministry. We don't have the experience of Jesus, the person, with us, but we do have experiences of the "holy." We know, don't we, when we are present in what is so good and right that we just feel it. Our lesson in 2 Peter has a description that I may have to write out and post by my desk: "Be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."

The text in 2 Peter is a warning against false prophets. The truth, the writer says, is like the dawn of the day — it removes the fears that can grow in the darkness, the ones that make us think only of ourselves and our own survival. The light clears the shadows of misunderstanding and half-truths. And the morning star rises in our hearts — the truth is empowering, bright and unmarked, reviving. We know when we have found the truth, because it also brings a sense of peace and a desire to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The truth is a community thing.

#2

About six years ago, I was the interim chaplain at Hanover College, a Presbyterian school in southern Indiana. I taught an introductory course in religion that was one of the options to fulfill a requirement. So, my classes were large — there were some serious students, and others who only wanted to get through with the least amount of pain. We had the full range of religious experience from devout to atheist, regular church-goers to never stepped a foot into a church door.

The purpose of our studies was not to judge one another's faith experience, but to introduce some factual information about religion and lead students to think critically about their own beliefs. One of the first assignments I gave, as I recall, was to have them write a brief paper about three authorities in their lives, three people who were influential, whom they could trust to tell them the truth.

They chose parents, coaches, friends, aunts and uncles, grandparents, teachers — none of those was surprising. But the stories were. The students seemed to let go, and exposed their vulnerability in ways that clearly showed their own search for truth. Most chose people who were living; a few named Jesus; one described the recent loss of a grandmother who had been so important in her life.

The assignment helped us to talk about what we believe and whom we choose to believe. In a world with much more information than any of us can analyze and understand, we all choose people we trust to help us. The question we must ask, though, is whether or not the people we choose are telling the truth. We can't, and we don't, choose alone; we verify our choices by talking with others. Again, truth is a community thing.

#3

A third biblical instruction for discerning the truth comes in a great story in the NT book of Acts. The apostles were being persecuted for teaching in the name of the crucified Christ. They were imprisoned, miraculously escaped, captured again and put on trial. In the midst of the arguments and chaos, a Pharisee named Gamaliel stood up. He reminded his fellow council members of another Galilean who had attracted followers, but when he died, the people scattered and they heard no more of it. So, he reasoned, just let the apostles alone — if it is just another human phenomenon, it will fail; if it is of God, he said, "you will not be able to overthrow them; in that case, you may even be found fighting against God!" [Acts 5:17-42] In other words, time will tell — the truth will surface in time.

#4

The fourth way is described in the book of James, where we find familiar argument about faith without works, and “by my works I will show you my faith.” Truth has the element of integrity, and the lesson in James is that faith and works must be consistent. What we say must be seen in what we do. Jesus said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount: he used images of a good tree and a bad tree to distinguish between true and false prophets. [Mt. 7:15–20] By their fruits you will know them . . . by their works . . . by what they do and cause to happen, you will know them.

### **Searching for the truth . . .**

So, we have, at least, some guidelines for finding the truth. We have experience, persons of authority whom we trust, the old saying, “time will tell,” and the integrity of what is said and what is done. Are these adequate? I don’t think so; that is, not unless we come together as a community of faith to share our perceptions, experiences and questions. Once we say we believe, we are never a separate part of the Body of Christ. We need one another in the search for truth.

If we see a fly ball heading over the fence at a baseball game, we may be ready to declare a homerun. But if we’re distracted at that last, critical second and miss actually seeing it go over, if it did, we need someone else to complete the story.

If we hear that the Moderator or the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian General Assembly said something negative about churches leaving the denomination, do we stop to ask who is reporting? If we have the impression that our church hierarchy is nothing more than a waste of time and money, have we ever asked to talk with someone serving on the staff, learned about their work and shared our concerns? We may need someone else to complete the story.

### **Conclusion**

It has been a major undertaking, this search for truth, and we have only begun. It’s really too much for one sermon, even a series of sermons. If nothing else, perhaps we have renewed our commitment to the search.

One last biblical text for guidance. I leave it with you as an assignment: Read 1 Corinthians, chapter 13. When in doubt about the truth, simply judge what you hear, what you see, the people who challenge you, as well as the people with whom you surround yourself, using the words that so wonderfully describe God’s great gift of love.

Marie T. Cross  
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Poland Presbyterian Church