



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

What is Truth?

John 18:33-38

*Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?'³⁴ Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?'³⁵ Pilate 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?'³⁶ Jesus 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.'³⁷ Pilate 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.'³⁸ Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'**

"Let me tell you the truth." That is a strange, but all too common, expression. "Let me tell you the truth." When someone uses that phrase are they implying that they have not been telling the truth until that point? Truth seems to be fleeting in our world.

- When I was in college, in the midst of the Watergate scandal, I remember hearing Ron Ziegler, the Whitehouse press secretary, tell reporters that a statement he made a few days earlier was "in-operative." What did that mean? Once true, but no longer true?
- Stephen Colbert, the late night humorist, coined the word "*truthiness*" which refers to knowing something intuitively, instinctively, or "from the gut" without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or actual facts. Do we live in a world where truthiness is more readily accepted than truth?
- 65 years ago, George Orwell used the term: "*Newspeak*" to describe how language was being manipulated and shrunk to fit the purposes of propaganda and myth creation.

Truth is fleeting in our environment of technology and instant communication. The joke is, "If it's on the internet, it must be true." Bombarded with so much information, purporting to be true, it is not uncommon to hear someone say: "I don't know what to believe." Those words echo the words spoken by Pilate: "What is truth?"

The great end of the church, which I wish to look at today is "the preservation of truth." The church exists to preserve truth. Two points; First. What is truth? And Second: How do we preserve it?

I

What is truth? One of the popular books of the last decade was entitled: *Men are from Mars, Women from Venus*. The thesis of the book is that the sexes perceive reality differently and use language differently, consequently men and women don't understand each other. In the confrontation between Jesus and Pilate, we might conclude that Jesus was from Earth and Pilate from Jupiter, so different are their views of reality. When Pilate asked the question of Jesus, "What is truth?" he was speaking from his background in the Roman Academy. Truth in Greco-Roman thought was an idealistic abstraction. It existed apart from the senses as an objective reality. How strange that question seemed when it was posed to Jesus.

Jesus was not interested in abstraction and objective reality. He, a Middle-Eastern peasant, was not schooled in the idealistic philosophies of Greece and Rome. When he spoke of truth he said: "I am the truth (John 14:6)." The Gospel of John also identified Jesus with the truth, and concluded with the words: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free (John 8:32)." For Jesus, the truth was not some abstraction that existed apart from the experience of life.

Truth is not merely an idea. Truth is experienced, and most importantly, it is lived. If it is not lived, it is not truth. Truth is not the ascent to an idea, it is a way of life. It is following Christ as his disciple, even to the cross.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that the primary task for the Christian in the modern world is to struggle with the question: "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" This is the question of truth. 2000 years after the life of Jesus, we need to wrestle with the question of who Jesus was, and is. (For example), Jesus did not live in the computer age. Many of the problems and challenges that we face today could not even be described in the language that Jesus used. What is Truth? It is not an idea, a concept or an abstraction. Truth is Jesus Christ. Two groups in our congregation are studying Diana Butler Bass' book, *A People's History of Christianity*. They have learned that followers of Jesus during the first five centuries identified truth and beauty with Jesus, and understood truth to be "a way of life." Christians were said to be "followers of the way."

What do we know about Jesus and the way he lived?

- He healed the sick.
- He fed the hungry.
- He comforted those who were afflicted, and challenged those who were smug and comfortable.
- He affirmed the outcasts and those who society turned their backs on.
- He challenged the conventions of his day that perpetuated poverty, alienation, and exploitation.

His life was the way of truth.

It requires moral courage to follow that way.

II

How do we preserve truth? We study, examine and learn facts. We live truth. Sally Lowe Whitehead wrote in her memoir: "The truth might set you free, but first it will shatter the safe, sweet world you live in." (*The Truth Shall Set You Free: A Memoir*) This is the trouble with the truth. It has a way of upsetting the applecart and shaking up the simple myths by which we live our lives, because truth is lived not learned. The *preservation of truth* is not merely realized through study or intellectual ascent...

- Truth is preserved in concrete actions.
- Truth is preserved in the feeding of the hungry, the healing of the sick.
- Truth is preserved in building homes for homeless and visiting those in prison, be it the lockups and jails, or the prisons of addiction, loneliness and despair.
- Truth is preserved in transforming the prayers which we say and the hymns which we sing into concrete actions that witness to the spirit of Jesus Christ and the work of Jesus Christ in our lives and the world.

As Poland Presbyterian Church considers its future, and begins the process of calling a pastor to serve in this community, it needs to recommit to the way of the truth and become a force for truth in the lives of its people and in the common life of this community.

Last week, the major story in the news was "Pope-mania". The American public went gaga over the pope during his recent visit. Why, the pundits wondered? Is it not because Pope Francis, in his simple lifestyle, his unassuming manner, his moral courage, and his gentle expression of Christian love, embodies the truth for which we all hunger?

Finally, truth is also preserved through exposure of all that obscures and hides truth. It unmask all that stands in the way of truth. Truth is preserved where the light of Christ is allowed to shine in the darkness of evil and death, and when it shines, those who perpetrate lies will scatter like cockroaches in the light. In this world preservation of truth often leads to discomfort and even intimacy with the cross.

The purpose, (the Fourth Great End) of the church is to preserve the truth. This means that we not only speak the truth in love. We live the truth with love. We expose the lies that mask as truth. We embody the way of Christ in our lives. We embody the way of Christ in our Church. This is the challenge of Christian life... the challenge of discipleship. Amen.