



Preservation of the Truth

SCRIPTURE:
John 18:33-38
Ex 32:16-6

September 26, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

The fourth great end of the church, according to our spiritual grandparents, is the preservation of the truth. The preservation of the truth. Jesus stood before Pilate and Pilate asked, “What is truth?” How would you answer Pilate’s question?

George Washington’s father had a beloved cherry tree. It was chopped down, for some reason or another. When confronted, George responded, “I cannot tell a lie; I chopped down the cherry tree.” It’s a wonderful story. But historians believe it is apocryphal. In other words: The story we tell to encourage truth-telling is not factually true.

So why do we tell it? A couple of reasons. One is we know that telling the truth is never as easy as it sounds. And we know that telling the truth is the only way communities can live together. Apart from truth-telling, trust erodes and communities fall apart. That has probably happened to you in your own life. Truth is the ligament that holds communities together—from families to nations. Christian faith, a faith that is rooted in love for neighbor, has as its first concern the health of communities. So it is no surprise that we should be concerned with the preservation of the truth. So, what is truth?

In 1972, NASA launched Pioneer 10, a spacecraft with the power to escape the solar system. Eighteen months later, it was sending pictures of Jupiter. But it kept going. The last time it was heard from was 2003 as it was on its way to the Aldebaran star. (It is part of the constellation Taurus.) It will take two million years to reach Aldebaran. In a first for NASA, Pioneer 10 was prepared for the possibility that she might be intercepted by intelligent life. An

aluminum plaque was attached to the spacecraft with messages for whomever might be out there. Of course, it is unlikely intelligent life beyond the solar system would be fluent in English, so how would we communicate? Is there a language that would be recognized across the universe? NASA thought so.

The plaque showed the layout of our solar system, our location in the Milky Way galaxy, and the structure of the hydrogen atom. Why the hydrogen atom and a layout of the solar system? As Neil deGrasse Tyson says in his book, *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry*, science is the universal language—literally. The laws of science will be the same on a distant planet as they are here. If there is a way to communicate with alien life, it will begin with the truth we know through science.¹

Pilate asked Jesus: What is truth? How would you answer that? To speak of what you believe to be true, you must first answer: How do you know something is true? Theologians and philosophers speak of epistemology.² If that is not a common word for you, let me attempt to explain it. It is the study of how you know the truth is true. There are different types of epistemologies. There is that which we know through science, but there is also moral knowledge. There is mathematical truth and there is religious truth. These are all knowable subjects, but how we know them varies.

I know 440 vibrations per second produces a pitch of A and I know Abraham Lincoln was a great president. I know that “Abide with Me” is a beautiful hymn and I know that Jesus Christ is Lord. I know all of these things, but the means by which I ascertain their truth varies.

1 Neil deGrasse Tyson, *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry*, (2017) pp. 38-40. This citation is not just to the final paragraph, but to all the information regarding Pioneer 10 and Voyager.

2 *Epistemology*, The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology, (1983).

So, how do we ascertain truth today? In our culture, to answer that question requires a reflection on the Enlightenment. Historians trace the beginnings of the Enlightenment to 17th century thinkers like René Descartes. Descartes said, “I think, therefore, I am.”

But Descartes did more than think. He changed the way we think. Descartes, and the rest of Enlightenment philosophers, questioned the epistemology of those before him. Before the Enlightenment, truth was defined by tradition. Conviction. Belief. But Descartes taught us that truth—capital “T” Truth—is that which is factually true. That which can be discerned through the senses and that which can be logically deduced through reason. Capital “T” Truth is that which can be plastered on a spacecraft and recognized as truth in outer space.

Simply stated: The Enlightenment shifted our epistemology. Capital “T” Truth was no longer determined by tradition or culture, but by facts alone. The Enlightenment taught us to speak of the science of evolution. That’s a factual conversation. But Enlightenment thinking has limits, too. To speak of facts only, one can speak of evolution but not of creation. Certainly not of creation by a creator because that is a conversation that is larger than the facts. This is my point today. We know some things by *fact*. We know some things by *conviction*.

Two things about that. The first: Our convictions cannot live contrary to fact. The second: We need to be clear what we know by fact and what we know by conviction and not confuse the two.

One example: Jesus stands before Pilate and soon Jesus is tortured and crucified. These are the facts and they are important. But knowing the facts is not enough.

Imagine you were there. You saw it all—the crown of thorns, the flogging, the pounding of the nails, the taunting, and finally, his lifeless body. Imagine you saw it all. You would know what happened. You would know the facts. But unless you could see beyond those facts and know that the love of God was redeeming the world, you didn’t see what was really happening. That’s the truth. And the whole truth is too big to squeeze into facts.

I have spent my ministry inviting you and others

to look beyond the simple facts of the story to the truth of the story. To *know* this story—not contrary to fact, but bigger than fact. To know what the facts mean.

But recently, the ground has shifted. I now find it important to say something that for thirty years of ministry, I assumed we already knew. Facts matter. The ground has shifted in part because we live in an age where freedom of speech is exercised with very little consideration of the responsibility of speech. The ground has shifted because, increasingly, sources that present themselves as news reporting the fact are actually advocates reporting conviction and they can’t (or choose not) to tell the difference between the two. Facts matter. They can’t tell the whole truth, but we do not endeavor to tell the truth without them.

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 agreed with the senator. I’m not sure we do now.

Today people think that they can create their own facts. Truth that is known by fact—the amount of carbon in the atmosphere or the date of the Emancipation Proclamation—and truth that is believed by conviction—peaches are delicious and God is love—are both true, but they do not share the same epistemologies. We know their truth in different ways and they shouldn’t be confused.

But today, more and more people seem to believe that whatever they decide the truth is, is true. The bible has an old word for that. It is idolatry.

The old story that we read in Exodus is funny. Moses is up the mountain with God and the people got impatient for his return, so they decide that they, the creatures, would become the creator and they would create God. It sounds ridiculous because we might love pretty things, but we know that no thing made of gold or stone is God. But think of this story this way: God is the source of truth. In God’s world, God is the source of truth. In God’s world, we do not determine the truth or create the truth; we simply *discover* the truth. So, to claim to make your own God is to say I will live in the world of my creation. I will decide what is true. I will not discern truth; I will invent truth.

We live in a time where idolatry is popular. A few years ago, the cover of *Time* magazine asked: Is Truth Dead?³ The article chronicled frequent public statements, asserted as fact, that had no basis in fact. It's not our only problem, but it is one reason community in America is under attack. Several years ago, the Rand Corporation released a report which they titled, "Truth Decay." Michael Rich, President of the Rand Corporation, said,

"This is to me... a dangerous and unusual time in history. Americans not only feel entitled to their opinions, but...a growing number of them... also feel entitled to cherry-pick facts to support their opinion, or even commission up new 'facts' if necessary. ... When everyone has their own facts, then nobody really has any facts at all."⁴

If Pioneer 10 is intercepted by intelligent life on its way to Aldebaran, the creatures who intercept it might know truth about us that many here fail to acknowledge. Fact is no longer a universal language. People are saying the facts don't matter. They are saying my beliefs matter more than fact.

Beliefs do matter. There is truth that we know and there is truth that we believe and both are important. I believe in my children and I believe in the church and I believe that Jesus is risen from the dead—none of which can I demonstrate factually. I am fine with that. But I'm not fine believing that which is contrary to fact. The earth is not flat. The sun does not rotate around her.

The carbon in the atmosphere is measurable. I

can believe I am 35 years old and a scratch golfer, but belief that is contrary to fact doesn't make it true. Truth is not invented, it is discovered.

This requires humility; to recognize that I am not the source of truth. I am a child of God who lives in the truth and, therefore, it is my responsibility not to create the truth, but to discover it and discern it. Both facts and beliefs have currency in our culture—and they should! But when we confuse our epistemologies and think beliefs and facts are interchangeable, the center no longer holds.

In an age of "Truth Decay," too many believe they can invent any truth they wish. They may assume there are no consequences, but they are wrong. There are consequences when we ignore the truth. When truth is ignored, communities can no longer hold together because trust erodes.

You know this in your own families. We have seen this in church families. It is true for nations. Our capacity to be in relationship with another depends on *trust*. It's why we tell that story of the cherry tree. We tell it because it reminds us that truth holds us together. And it is why truth is so important to Jesus because truth is the ligament that holds the communal body together. Since Christian faith is primarily concerned with how we are with our neighbors, it only follows that we need to be a people committed to the preservation of the truth.

We do this by living with the humility to recognize that we are not the source of truth. We do not create the truth; we discover and discern the truth.

3 *Time*, April 3, 2017.

4 "Truth Decay" Rand.org