



Truth Is Personal

TEXT
John 14:1-7
Philippians 1:3-11

January 21, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

I have not preached on this passage very often, and when I have, I have preached on the next verse: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” I have felt it important to point out a misuse, at least as I read the passage, a misuse of this text. That verse is often preached “No one comes to the Father except through *belief* in me.” That reading makes it sound like there is something we contribute to our salvation. But that’s not what Jesus says. He doesn’t say we come to God through our belief, he says we come to God through him. That’s different. He can save us, he can carry us to God, to a room prepared for us, and that’s the good news.

Sometimes I have preached about the room he has prepared. We stop to hear again his promise that death will not hold us. We have a home with God.

But this time I want to look at what he says in between these two statements. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” — particularly, “I am the truth.” What does that mean — Jesus is the truth?

I have been thinking about truth lately, and I have been thinking about how we discern truth. It’s been on my mind because we are living in days when there is no consensus on how to discern the truth; there is no consensus on how to define the truth. Just last year, Michael Scherer of *Time* magazine asked on the cover, “Is Truth Dead?”¹ I understand why he would ask it. I would suggest that truth is not dead, but it is always contested. There are always those who call the darkness light and the light darkness.

Part of our spiritual work is to discern the truth.

Jesus says that he is the truth. When he speaks of truth this way, he speaks in a way that is outside the norm of how we think of truth. He doesn’t say he has the truth or that he knows the truth; he says he *is* the truth. He speaks of truth not as some objective thing that can be recognized and known, but rather for him, truth is personal. What does that mean?

In the days of my youth, there was a bumper sticker that was popular — at least I saw it often in Atlanta. It read, “God said it, I believe it. That settles it.” Presumably God said it in

scripture. The drivers of these cars believe scripture. And that settles things.

I never liked that bumper sticker, but only recently have I realized where the flaw lies. I think scripture is the *word* of God, not the *words* of God; and better said, it becomes the word of God for us. I trust what I find in scripture. So far, so good! But the problem falls in the notion that the truth is something we “settle.” As one student of the text has said, “The remarkable thing about God’s word is how unsettling it has always been.”² The truth of Jesus Christ is not a new idea he gave to his disciples; it wasn’t a new philosophy to be debated; the truth was himself, his life.

Do you see what I mean? When he speaks of truth, he speaks in a way that is outside the norm of how we think of truth.

When we talk about truth, we tend to talk about facts — of course. We are children of the Enlightenment. It was René Descartes, a 17th century philosopher, who said, “I think, therefore I am.” As much as I understand him and those who followed him, Descartes was pointing to reason as the

means by which we know truth — and even deeper, reason is that which makes us human. I think, therefore I am. Well, it seems obvious that we can't know truth apart from reason. But I'm not sure that all truth is discerned by reason.

I don't think Jesus would say, "I think, therefore I am." I think Jesus would say, "I love, therefore I am." Jesus asserts that we are not primarily "thinking beings"; we are first "loving beings." The Apostle Paul did not write, "It is my prayer that your reason may grow, that you know what to love." No, Paul says, "It is my prayer that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge."

For Paul, love is the condition for knowledge.³

If I understand the text, this means that truth is personal. Jesus said, *I, my person, am truth*. He was not claiming to be smart. He was claiming to be love. That is the truth that makes us human.

I am in no way suggesting that reason is to be cast aside. Please, no. We have witnessed too many expressions of Christian faith that seem to be devoid of honest reason, and the results are either insulting or damaging. To say that love is the condition for knowledge is not to say we need less than reason; it is to say we need more than reason.⁴

Let me say this more simply. There are some things we know by reason — some things we know by our head. And there are some things that

are known by our heart. That is the truth of which Jesus speaks: It is personal. Parker Palmer has said, "In Christian understanding, truth is not an object out there, but instead truth is personal ... truth is known in relationships. Jesus did not offer propositions or data ... he offered his life as the truth."⁵

I would suggest that the most important truths in your life are truths that you know by heart. And that truth is not contained by facts.

For example, if you turn to Webster's dictionary, you can find a definition of *marriage*. It states marriage is "the state of being united as spouses in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law." That's the fact.

But it's missing something, isn't it? If your spouse asks you, "What does our marriage mean to you?" and you say, "Darling, marriage is the state of being united in a consensual and contractual ..." well, it may be the last time you have to answer that question. It's factual, but it's not the truth. There is truth that is only known by heart. It requires the language of beauty and love, of goodness and faith.

The truth of which Jesus speaks is personal; it's known by heart. To say it is personal does not mean it is private; it means it's relational. As Palmer says, truth is known in relationships.

There is a tradition in the West that faith is to be private. Faith is to be separated from all communal things. As George

Will once said, "Religion is to be perfectly free as long as it is perfectly private ... private and subordinate [to the state]."⁶

Well, it could be private if the truth of Christian faith were an idea. But "knowing the truth is not an argument to be won or a debate to be settled, but a way of loving the world."⁷ It's not private.

To say truth is personal means it's relational. When I grew up, some folks would talk about Jesus "coming into your heart." That doesn't make too much sense to me. I think it's better to think of Jesus "coming into our relationships." That's where it shows up because love is relational.

When Jesus says, "I am the truth," I think he is saying, apart from love you cannot be human; you cannot know the world and her purpose. For the power that has brought everything into being is love, and that power of love is our home.

To love is to be true.

I love Fred Craddock's confession — a moment in his own life when he learned this distinction. Fred was one of the finest preachers in this country in the past generation.

He tells of a time he met Albert Schweitzer. You know about Albert Schweitzer? He was a medical doctor, a concert organist, a biblical scholar, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and a missionary in Africa. Dr. Schweitzer wrote a book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Craddock says he read in the paper that Dr. Schweitzer would be nearby playing an or-

gan concert, and he would also be in the Fellowship Hall for conversation after the concert.

Dr. Craddock read *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* and found it lacking. “More water than wine,” he said. He studied Dr. Schweitzer’s text and took notes. The concert was masterful, but Craddock was there for the conversation in the Fellowship Hall. He rushed in and got a seat on the front row. He waited with his lap filled with notes and questions.

Craddock says, “After a while he came in, shaggy hair, big white mustache, stooped, and seventy-five years old. He came in with a cup of tea ... and stood in front of the group. Dr. Schweitzer thanked everybody: ‘You’ve been very warm, hospitable to me. I thank you for it, and I wish I could stay longer among you, but I must go back to Africa. I must go back to Africa because my people are poor and diseased and hungry and dying, and I have to go. If any of you in this room are moved by the love of Jesus ... to go with me [you would be as welcome there as you have made me feel here.]’”

Craddock said, “I looked down at my questions; they were so absolutely stupid. And I learned, again, what it means to be Christian and had hopes that I could be that someday.”⁸

Time magazine asks if truth is dead. Of course, they are talking about what we know by reason. And that’s an important conversation we can talk more about next week. But

for followers of Christ, truth is defined by Christ — which is to say truth is defined by love. And it is not dead. It is contested every day, but it is not dead.

But it must be chosen!

¹*Time*, April 3, 2017

²Thomas W. Currie, III, *Searching for Truth: Confessing Christ in an Uncertain World* (2001), p. 2

³James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (2016), p. 7

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 6

⁵Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known* (1983), pp. 47–48

⁶Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom* (1991), p. 30

⁷Smith, p. 110

⁸Mike Graves, ed., *Craddock Stories* (2001), p. 126

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.