



Truth and Knowledge Are Not the Same, but They Are Friends

TEXT
John 18:33–19:7

January 28, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Young George Washington chopped down his father's cherry tree. 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. I'll confess, that doesn't bother me at all.

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. (That is what I want to talk about next Sunday). We also 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 a time or two in your own families. It can happen in church families. It's true in nations. Truth is the ligament that holds the communal body together.

On March 3, 1972, NASA launched Pioneer 10, a spacecraft with the power to escape the solar system. By November of 1973, it was sending pictures of Jupiter. But it kept going. After 1997, there was only oc-

casional contact. The last time it was heard from was 2003, as it was on its way to the Aldebaran star (the star that is the eye of the constellation Taurus). It will take 2 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 whoever might be out there. If you were tasked with designing that plaque, what would you say? And more importantly, how would you say it? It's unlikely that intelligent life beyond the solar system will be fluent in English. 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. Later the spacecraft Voyager was launched, and it included a gold record album containing sounds of the human heartbeat, whale songs and musical selections, including the works of Beethoven and Chuck Berry. While this humanized the message, it's not clear whether alien ears would

have a clue what they were listening to — assuming they have ears in the first place.

Shortly after this launch, *Saturday Night Live* did a skit in which they showed a written reply from the aliens who recovered the spacecraft. The note simply requested, "Send more Chuck Berry."

OK, 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 physics will be the same on a distant planet as they are here. If there is a way to communicate with alien life, it will be the truth we know through science.¹

Jesus stood before Pilate, and Pilate asked, "What is truth?" How would you answer Pilate's question? I hope, particularly if you were with us last Sunday, you might answer, "Jesus is the truth." But there is more than one answer.

Theologians and philosophers speak of epistemology. If that is not a common word for you, let me attempt to explain it. It is the study of the truth and how we know it. There are different types of epistemologies. There is that which we know

through science, and there is moral knowledge. There is mathematical truth, and there is religious truth. These are all knowable subjects, but how we know them varies.²

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.

So, how do we ascertain truth today? As I said last Sunday, I am not sure there is a consensus these days as to how truth is known.

I know how we used to determine truth. Many historians trace the beginnings of the Enlightenment to 17th century thinkers like René Descartes. I mentioned him last week. Descartes was the one who said, “I think, therefore I am.”

But Descartes did more than think. He changed the way we think. Descartes, and the rest of the Enlightenment thinkers, questioned the epistemology of those before him. 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 logically be 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. The Enlightenment taught us to speak of the science of evolution. That’s a factual conversation. But the Enlightenment can’t talk about the world being created, by a creator, because that is a conversation that’s bigger than the facts. In the West, we learned to trust facts.

This is an interesting thing when it comes to reading the Bible. The Bible was written long before the Enlightenment. It would be difficult to get Enlightenment thinking out of us; but it is impossible to get it into the writers of scripture. Still, there are some, influenced by Enlightenment thinking, who insist that the only way the Bible can be true is if it is factually true. So, they insist that creation happened in a week. They insist that Jonah spent the weekend in a fish. They insist that not only Jesus, but also Peter, walked on water. And they insist when Jesus returns, he will ride a cumulus cloud. This is the faith of fundamentalism. I suggest that they have gotten confused on their epistemology. They have confused that which is factually true with that which is larger than fact. That confusion results in a faith that is too small and a God that is too mechanical.

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. You 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 in more than one way.

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. The ground has shifted — in part because we live in an age of social media where anyone can post or tweet anything, and freedom of speech is exercised with very little consideration of the responsibility of speech. The ground has shifted because increasingly our sources of news have elevated commentary over reporting, and some have made no distinction between the two. The ground has shifted — and for the first time in my ministry, I feel that it is important to say this: Facts matter. They can’t tell the whole truth, but we do not endeavor to tell the truth without them.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, former senator and ambassador and presidential advisor, said, “Everyone is entitled to

his own opinions, but not to his own facts.” I’m not sure there is a consensus with this statement.

It seems that today people think they can create their own facts. Truth that is known by fact, and truth that is believed by conviction, are both important, but they are not the same. And they shouldn’t be confused. We see this in public discourse. Sometimes conclusions are based on facts, and sometimes conclusions provide the basis from which we build out facts.

Time Magazine asked last year, “Is Truth Dead?”³ The article chronicled a number of statements, primarily regarding the last election — claims asserted as truth that had no basis in fact. The Rand Corporation has released a recent 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 — and rightly so — but ... a growing number of them, across the political spectrum, 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

We experience this all the time. We witness today frequent conversations about scientific matters that would cause Descartes to roll over. People speak of the effect of vaccines

or the reality of climate change, and often these conversations ignore scientific fact, even when the scientific community essentially provides consensus. People are saying that the facts don’t matter. *My belief matters more than fact.*

It’s one thing to claim belief larger than fact; it is something else to claim belief contrary to fact. A couple years ago, now Secretary Rick Perry responded to an assertion that climate change was real by saying, “The science is not settled just because a group of scientists stand up and say, ‘Here is the fact.’ Remember,” he said, “Galileo got outvoted for a spell.”⁵ Well, yes, he did. But the sun didn’t start rotating around the earth after the vote.

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 am 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 measureable. I can believe I am 35 years old and a scratch golfer, but my belief that is contrary to fact doesn’t make it true.

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.

It is not uncommon for our president to make comments, or to do so through his staff, that demonstrate a casualness with facts. It’s troubling. I don’t think anyone in this room, regardless of your party, celebrates when facts are ignored or denied or invented. None of us wants that. Someone said to me, “Well, it doesn’t really matter.” Yes, it does. There are consequences.

Last weekend Carol and I went to see the movie *The Post*. Meryl Streep was amazing. It tells the story of *The Washington Post* chasing *The New York Times* in publishing the Pentagon Papers. The Pentagon Papers was a study of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. The Pentagon Papers revealed that administration after administration — Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon — lied about our success or lack thereof in Vietnam. Each administration kept sending boys to fight a war that they knew we could not win. The Nixon administration took the *Post* and the *Times* to court to stop them from publishing. Freedom of the press won with that court.

But there was something else to note. The reason the administration took the newspapers to court is because they believed there would be political consequences when they were caught lying. They were right.

But there were greater consequences. There is a black wall in Washington, DC, etched with 59,000 names, that identifies the consequences of diss-

ing the truth. Some of you have family members named there.

In an age of “Truth Decay,” too many believe they can invent any truth they wish. The jury is out as to whether there are political consequences for those who lie. The jury is out as to whether there are market consequences for those who lie.

But there are consequences when we ignore the truth. Facts matter. When they are ignored, communities can no longer hold together because the basis of trust is lost.

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. In part, because telling the truth is never as easy for any of us as we wish it were. (I’ll talk about that next Sunday). But we also 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. Truth is what holds together the body of Christ.

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

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

³*Time*, April 3, 2017

⁴Rand.org, “Truth Decay”

⁵Shawn Otto, *The War on Science* (2016), p. 28

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

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