

The Preservation of the Truth

*Summer Series on the
Great Ends of the Church*

from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
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John 18:28-38a

²⁸Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" ³⁰They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him

over to you.”³¹ Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.” The Jews replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.”³² (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)³³ 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?” After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him.

Less than a decade into the cold war, the American Friends Service Committee, an advocacy and activist wing of the Quaker movement, published a series of pamphlets in response to tensions between Western democracies and the rise of communism. The fourth pamphlet in the series, published in 1955, on a Quaker search for an alternative to violence in the face of mounting military arsenals was entitled - *Speak Truth to Power*.

While that to us today seems like a common expression - speaking truth to power, this pamphlet is the first published occurrence of it. Some claim that it can be traced back to the Friends movement in the 1700's, but others are more confident that it was actually first used by local African American Quaker and civil rights activist Bayard Rustin from a speech that he gave in 1942 saying that it is the role of any religious group to speak truth to power. Because at the time it was a new phrase, though certainly not a new concept,

the introduction provides some definitions speaking from the deepest insights of their Quaker faith. They wrote:

“We speak to power in three senses: To those who hold high places in our national life and bear the terrible responsibility of making decisions for war or peace. To the American people who are the final reservoir of power in this country and whose values and expectations set the limits for those who exercise authority. To the idea of Power itself, and its impact on Twentieth Century life.

Our truth is an ancient one: that love endures and overcomes; that hatred destroys; that what is obtained by love is retained, but what is obtained by hatred proves a burden.”¹

This Sunday marks the middle of our summer preaching series on the Great Ends of the Church as we have reflected together on the essential work of the church - not necessarily just a particular church like ours, or even the Presbyterian Church, but the Church of Jesus Christ even in its many various and yet unified manifestations. Today we are called to contemplate the meaning of truth in relation to church and the role of truth in the world today. A concept that even ancient philosophers and Pontius Pilate himself wrestled with.

In this small portion of the much longer passion narrative from the Gospel of John, we have the most dramatic of interchanges between Jesus of Nazareth and the Roman Governor. In fact in the other three Gospels, Jesus barely even responds in the face of his judgement before Pilate, whereas here in John, Jesus uses this audience to continue to declare a truth that he has been preaching and teaching about for his entire ministry.

¹ *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence*, American Friends Service Committee, 1955.

Truth is one of the primary themes in the Gospel of John - with the Greek word for truth occurring 48 times. By comparison, truth is mentioned only 10 times in all three other gospels combined.

Even from the very beginning of John we hear it - “the world became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory as of a Father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” From our bulletin cover this morning taken from the Nation Window of the Chapel - you will know the truth and the truth will set you free - John 8:32. And of course John 14:6: I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the father but through me.

Here in Pilate’s praetorium, he sets about to determine the truth as to the claims of the Jewish authorities against Jesus, and to determine the level of threat that Jesus poses to the Roman colonial authority in that place. Jesus is more interested not the details of an earthly truth or even an earthly overthrow of either of their authorities, but rather to continue to declare the essential truth of his identity as the Son of God and the ruler of a kingdom not of this earth.

This is the essential truth that he has testified to again and again, even as his disciples, his followers and the religious authorities struggled to understand it - that he comes from and brings a knowledge of a world that is real and based on the reality of God. Proclaiming this truth while simultaneously also being this truth is what makes him a king unlike any they have known.

While Greeks may have been concerned with the concept of truth as a perception of reality and Romans with a knowledge and understanding of facts, this truth that Jesus embodies is entirely related to the truth of his relationship and identity woven within the identity and power of God his Father.

Theologian Miroslav Volf writes in his seminal work - Exclusion and Embrace

*“Trials are supposed to be about finding out what happened and meting out Justice. In Jesus trial, neither the accusers nor the judge cared for the truth...the judge scorns the very notion of truth... the truth is irrelevant because it works at cross purposes to their hold on power. Jesus would rather die witnessing to the truth than live manipulating others by making his own agenda pass as truth. He would rather the truth carry a victory while he himself suffers a defeat than trample truth underfoot and emerge as a hero.”*²

It is this kind of passive resistance in the presence of worldly authority, a devotion to the truth in the midst of a web of slander and confusion, a speaking of truth to power an ancient theme of our tradition that continues to compel us as people of faith to ask today which truths we can hold this fast to, as Jesus does, and can be so confident in proclaiming.

Biblical scholar Andres Koestenberger can't help himself in his interpretation of this text to compare it to any number of modern images of human beings being willing to speak truth to power. He writes... *“The view of the lone helpless prisoner before the representative of imperial roman power is not unlike the image of a Chinese student defying a tank at the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square.”*³

This week we paused in our lives to remember that we are a nation built upon the belief in certain truths and that speaking those truths to the power is foundational to our national history, as flawed as we continue to understand that history to be. Truths about equality and unalienable rights to life and self-determination. And it is our task as a country to try to figure out how to make sure that these indeed are truths that are really true for all people.

It is a history born of the enlightenment that changed both our understanding of government and religious life in the hope in both, the state and the church, that the more that truth could be held equally by all people that power might be shared equally as well. So while at moments in the

² *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation.* Miroslav Volf. Abingdon. 1996.

³ *The Theology of John's Gospel and Letters.* Andreas Koestenberger. Zondervan. 2009.

history of the church, the church found its power in holding a monopoly on the essential truths of faith and life, as Christians and as church today we are much more willing to explore and challenge what is true and what is essential to our faith un-anxious that asking questions or hearing new ideas or bringing modern nuances to ancient truths would ever be the end of the church.

Essential in our calling to preserve the truth, as the Great Ends instruct us, is a willingness to be engaged with the truths of our faith, of scripture and of our experiences as people created in the image of God.

Now that is all very lovely and compelling when we only have to uphold these truths, debate and preserve these truths within the walls of the church. It gets a little trickier when we hold onto the belief - that Bayard Rustin proposed that it is also the role of the church to declare those truths to the world and to expect those truths to influence the world around us.

Any number of us these days, might ask the same question that Pilate did - what is truth anymore? How do we tell fact from fiction? How to weigh one person's perception of reality against another's very different perception? And often how to navigate these conversations about truth between and among people who we love.

University of Pennsylvania Professor of History, Sophia Rosenberg in her very new book *Democracy and Truth: A Short History*, points out that while we may feel like we are living today in a time when truth is at its most tenuous, our struggle with truth and power and our shared life is not actually new at all. But she does point out one thing that seems to have changed and that is new in our particular moment in time -

“Our dismay over our failure to find common ground in our concept of reality is, at present, primarily focused on empirical facts or truths rather than moral or logical ones. We have largely abandoned the idea that ready consensus about ethical or eternal truths, aside from a few platitudes, is necessary or even possible in a pluralistic world. That is one reason religious belief has, in many democracies, been legally sequestered in the private

sphere and rendered a matter of individual conscience. Many people do, of course, bring their private convictions into their public lives, and they often become points of contention in practice; but we do not generally expect that religious truths or teachings should be a source of ready agreement."⁴

So, if this is actually the case, what is the role of the church in not just claiming certain things as true and essential, but putting them out into world with authority when they might not be recognized, valued or even heeded by anyone with any power to make a difference in the world?

Are there essential truths of our faith that we can all agree on, that transcend the particularities of our current age, but that still speak to them in ways that are challenging and transformative?

Is it our work to simply preserve the truths of our faith as historical artifacts reminiscent of who the church has been? Or to preserve them as an inheritance for this generation and the next in the belief that the church continues to have a relevant and transformative truth to declare to the world?

Is it possible that as a starting point we might remember that our truth is as simple as the one that the Quakers declared two generations ago - that love is the source of all goodness and life in this world, and that anything that works against love denies the essential values which we claim as Christians? Is this something worth preserving and proclaiming in the world? Certainly we live in a world desperate for the transformative work of love in the face of divisions and hate born of competing claims on so many non-essential truths.

Jesus sitting in that room, questioning and being questioned by Pilate is not just the embodiment of truth, but the embodiment of love as well - the love of God for him and his love lived out through self-sacrifice on our behalf and behalf of the world. As Christians we have always been and will always be called to witness to that love, and to preserve it as real and true, not just as a source of our light but as a light shared with the world. It is a love given

⁴ *Democracy and Truth: A Short History*. Sophia Rosenfeld. University of Pennsylvania Press. 2019.

freely to us so that we might come to understand that there is no power or authority in the world that cannot be challenged and improved for the sake of love.

Many years ago early in my ministry I remember in my wrestling with that other verse from John that I just mentioned - I am the way, the truth and the life - trying to figure out what it means *in the 21st century* that Christians might have a claim to the truth, and might be unashamed to put it out there in the world, when a colleague shared how he had come to read that verse - He said - if God is love, and Jesus is God, then isn't what Jesus is trying to make them and in theory us understand is this - that love is the way, and that love is the truth, and that love is life?

I would hope that despite any of our disagreements over politics within or outside of the church, that this essential truth of love is something that we should all be able to agree on, and be willing to speak out into the world. Even though it may feel like the world is not listening, we still speak this truth together, binding us to one another, to our God who created us as beloved children, and to the truth that love is the strongest power we can preserve.