

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“WHAT IS TRUTH?”
Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21
JANUARY 24, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES

I have heard people say, “**I’m spiritual, but I’m not religious.**” Of course, I realize that it is usually “**organized**” religion that they are talking about. Christianity did not begin as an organized religion. It began as a way of life. Early on, followers of Jesus were called people of “**the way.**” Where religion is vital, it is always primarily a way of living.

Jesus understood the true nature of prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophets did not predict the future as much as create the future. Their promises only came true when the people of God carried out the prophets’ message into their daily living.

God’s promises cannot be fully realized without our help. Now that may be considered blasphemy by some. But we must always have the courage to keep God’s truth at the center of all we do. Covenant faith has always involved both privilege and responsibility. We cannot have one without the other.

Luke wrote his Gospel to someone named Theophilus so that he might know the truth concerning the things he had heard. Truth is praised everywhere and by everyone, as if its meaning were self-evident. The ancient philosopher Aristotle said, “**Plato is dear to me, but dearer still is truth.**” Pilate asked Jesus, “*What is truth?*” Jesus said to his followers, “*If you continue in my word, . . . you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*” What is the truth of which Jesus speaks? What is the truth of the faith that has been delivered to us?

Truth claims stand or fall on whether or not they can be verified. If you claim that water freezes at thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit, I may believe you or not believe you. A third option would be to ask you to verify your claim. “**Prove it!**”

I might insist. If you tell me you have the names of twenty-five people who say that water freezes at thirty-two degrees, I may say, **“That only proves that twenty-five people believe as you do.”** To prove your truth claim, you would need to demonstrate the freezing of water at thirty-two degrees. But, when I have seen your demonstration, I may accuse you of deception and of rigging the results. Truth is a complex subject, and truth claims can be difficult to verify.

Suppose, as Christians, we are asked to verify the truth of our faith. How should we proceed? One approach would be to take one of the creeds of Christianity, enumerate its propositions one by one, and verify that each is true, not false. This approach might honor the scientific method and the principles of linguistic analysis, but we could not possibly prove or disprove the truth of the Christian faith in this manner. In its original form, the Christian faith was not a finished set of propositions, and the creeds and written beliefs of the faith appeared much later. Despite the emphasis that has been placed on beliefs and theological formulations, and despite the benefits of applying reason to faith, Christianity was first of all a way of living. People came to Jesus, and some followed him, not because he was logical or scientifically accurate! People found in him the power of love, the will of God, and the way to live. Moreover, they verified these things in their own lives.

Truths concerning life’s meaning are not determined in a laboratory, but in the living of one’s life. It has been claimed that by all the calculations of aerodynamics the bumblebee should be unable to fly. Given its flimsy wings and short wing span, it just shouldn’t be able to get its husky body off the ground. It is a good thing bumblebees don’t know this! Similarly, for centuries it was debated whether it was possible for a machine that was heavier than air to fly. How could the atmosphere support an object that weighed more than the amount of air it displaced? Yet people continued to dream of flying and quite a few proposed ways it could be done. But the matter would never be settled by debate alone. On a December day in 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright proved that a heavier-than-air machine could fly - - - by flying. Jesus did not argue for the truth of faith, he lived it. He demonstrated its viability in his own life and his ministry.

Jesus went to his hometown of Nazareth and visited in the synagogue. There he read a passage from the prophet Isaiah. It spoke of God anointing a messenger to

proclaim marvelous things and perform mighty acts - - preaching good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, setting at liberty those who were oppressed, and proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord. After the reading, Jesus could have conducted an academic examination of the reading, or discussed its possible applications to the city fathers of Nazareth. But Jesus said, ***“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*** What the prophet had anticipated long ago was actualized in the life and ministry of Jesus. Isaiah’s prophecy was the truth of Jesus’ life, for all to see.

Following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, as years became decades, there were fewer and fewer eye-witnesses of his life and ministry. The Christian community increasingly committed its message and memories to writing. The Church Fathers, across the first five centuries of Christian history, produced theological formulations of the faith. **“Scholasticism,”** a big, academic-sounding word, refers to a system of teaching in the medieval universities of Europe that was based on the logic of Aristotle and the theology of the Church Fathers. This process was inevitable and its benefits are many. It helped to make a living faith a formal religion.

The truth of the Christian faith is not contained primarily in books. The truth of the Christian faith is found in the lives of the faithful. This is altogether appropriate, as is clear in everything Jesus said and did. The best argument for the Christian faith is a Christian life. When we observe a life devoted to loving God by loving the neighbor, we know we are in the presence of the truth. Arguments are beside the point. The truth of Jesus Christ is revealed in a life. That’s why we are a church for all people, regardless!

Let us lay aside for a moment the cerebral definitions of a Christian. To live as a Christian requires conviction more than belief, imagination more than comprehension and courage more than caution. Science fiction writer Ray Bradbury has a good word for us: **“If we listened to our intellect, we’d never have a love affair. We’d never have a friendship. We’d never go into business because we’d be cynical. Well, that’s nonsense. You’ve got to jump off cliffs all the time and build your wings on the way down.”**

If our creeds are merely propositions, it takes little courage to sign a statement of faith or to pledge allegiance to Christ. If, on the other hand, Christianity is a way of living, we have only to look at the endless generations of persecution and martyrdom to see the difference between faith and faithfulness. The enemies of Christ have always known this, and are not threatened by our endless words. But they tremble before those who are not afraid to die.

*I love thy church. O God; her walls before me stand,
dear as the apple of thine eye, and graven on thy hand.
For her my tears shall fall, for her my prayers ascend;
to her my cares and toils be giv'n till toils and care shall end.*

If you are not afraid to live your faith, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.