

## ***What is Truth?***

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Pullman, WA  
September 6, 2020

Ancient Witness: John 18:33-38

Not too long ago, I heard Timothy Snyder, Professor of History at Yale University, say this:

*If you want to rip the heart out of a democracy, you go after facts. That's what modern authoritarians do. Step 1: You lie. All the time. Step 2: You say its your opponents and journalists who lie. Step 3: Everyone looks around and says, "What is truth? There is no truth." Then resistance is impossible and the game is over.*

Today we see with our eyes the facts of racist police brutality and the denial of evidence of unequal application of the law.

We see the facts of climate change and the denial of evidence of catastrophic effects of fossil fuels.

We see the facts of a global pandemic and the denial of evidence of practices that can slow it down.

We see the facts of increasing concentration of wealth to the top 1% and the denial of evidence of the decline of the middle class and growing misery of the poor.

We see the facts of fair elections being undermined and the denial of evidence of voters purged from the rolls, voter suppression and polling places shut down.

If you want to exploit and enslave others, you attack truth. It is an age-old strategy.

In our story told by John, Jesus says, "Everyone who is *of the truth* listens to my voice." And then Pilate says, "Truth? What is that?"

Now this is an amazing dialogue between Jesus and Pilate told by John: Jesus is placed down before the Roman Governor and is asked, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And Jesus says something to the effect of "Why do you ask me? Do I look like a King to you?"

And with that question, the subject of the "trial" or inquisition is turned around. "You tell me, Pilate, am I a King or not?"

Then Pilate says, "Well, the chief priests of the Jews told me to take care of you." Jesus says something like, "O.K. I'll give you a hint: My kingship is not of this world. Now, am I a King to you?" Pilate still doesn't respond but asks, "so you *are* a king?"

Jesus says, "You still don't get it do you? I come to bear witness to the truth." And then Pilate, looking right at Jesus, speaks his famous line, "What is truth?"

And the point is that Pilate isn't interested in the truth at all. This is more of a rhetorical question: "What is truth? Ha!"

“Truth? Truth is powerless. We have the swords, the armor, the soldiers, the money. What can truth get you? You come here and say that you are a king and your kingdom is the kingdom of the truth? Ha! Good luck! History is written by the winners, baby. The truth, dear Jesus, is irrelevant.”

So you see, even though Pilate says, “I find no fault in him” and did not accept the charges of the scribes and priests against Jesus, the point of this whole exchange is that Pilate, the embodiment of the Empire, didn’t recognize the truth, either. And in the end, he never heard what Jesus was saying. It was staring him in the face, but he did not see the Truth.

Because often truth is not pleasing, acceptable and welcome to us. It contradicts us, and we resist it, much in the same way Pilate did. As Andrew Boyd put it, “The truth will set you free, but first it will hurt like hell.”

Speaking the truth can be a dangerous thing because of this resistance. “If you are going to tell people the truth,” said Oscar Wilde, “you had better make them laugh or they will kill you.” Of course Jesus knew this. New Testament scholar, CFD Moule said, “Jesus did not seek death, but pursued *a way of truth* that inevitably led him to death.” This way of truth was “despised and rejected” by people, said the prophet.

No, the truth is largely alien to us. It enters and invades our world and disrupts the status quo. It destroys ideologies of racism and privilege, greed and power. Truth liberates.

And while the acceptance of basic facts is crucial for the well being of society, facts are only a portion of truth.

Today I want to talk about truth and myth, since much of the language of faith is mythic language. However, ultimate truth is something that we can only allude to, point to. It can never be completely described.

Let me explain what I mean. “It is difficult for those of us educated in what is reported to be a science-permeated educational system,” said Andrew Greely, “to cope with the concept of myths.”

*We recollect from our grammar school and high school history courses that myths were rather bizarre tales told by the Greeks or Egyptians about their strange gods and goddesses before (humankind) became scientific...they were obviously untrue and hence did not have to be taken very seriously...We want to ask whether our ancient ancestors did or did not “really believe” these myths. Did they think they were “true” or “not true”? (Unsecular Man)*

We feel this way, I submit to you, because through history we have come to view truth as the same thing as literal and scientific fact. This is very dangerous for religion, and I’ll tell you why. Fact is actually only a small part of truth. But religious truth goes far beyond mere fact. And it is myth that gets at this kind of higher truth, which includes morality, beauty and transcendent experience. Myths are essential for human existence; they are a way to make sense in a senseless world.

Our present culture tends to identify myth as mere falsehood. The common phrase, “only a myth” points to a lack of appreciation of myth. Our modern culture is dominated by rationalism. Even many Christians become upset if we view parts of the Bible as myth.

But to call something a myth is actually a compliment, an honor. For myths are the highest order of truth. Whereas rationalistic language refers to specific, objective facts, myth refers to the meaning and significance of human life. As Thomas Mann put it, myth is an eternal truth in contrast to an empirical truth. So when we do not allow for a mythic view of Scripture and faith, we deny and rob them of their full value and beauty.

Walter Bruggemann talked about how the language of the Bible and of faith is poetic language. And we do violence to the Word of God when we “flatten the poetic word into mere prose.” We lose the tremendous depth of the language of faith when it is turned into a shallow representation.

You see, the ancient people’s way of telling the truth was to get emotionally and practically involved. The distinction between the subjective and objective was not there. Myth is not a video “instant replay” of history but stories that interpret the meaning that underlies the events of history.

Let’s say you are walking along a wooded path and it’s night. As you walk, you stop and look up at the moon between the branches of the trees. It is a full moon, bright and breath-taking in the clear, cool air. Now truth has to do more with the beauty and majesty of the experience of creation than it does with the exact circumference of the moon, its distance from the earth, etc.

The kind of truth we are talking about is the kind of which John said, describing Jesus as “the way, the truth and the life,” and “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” John is not saying that knowing the facts of that science will make you free, although they may help. He was talking about the inner meaning and purpose of the universe.

And this kind of truth is much more difficult to talk about. This kind of truth is beyond concept or thought; it is immeasurable. Moses asked God, “What is your name?” and God responds, “I am who I am.”

We cannot adequately describe the transcendent truth; we can only point to it, allude to it. Myth and metaphor are the only way we can touch it.

Truth in this broad sense is something which is experienced, not understood. Some of us experience Jesus as the Anointed One, but we do not intellectually grasp him. The world of fact cannot tolerate mystery, but the world of truth embraces mystery.

Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth*, talks about this mystery of truth, quotes the Chinese Tao-te Ching:

*He who thinks he knows, doesn’t know. He who knows that he doesn’t know, knows. For in this context, to know is not to know. And not to know is to know.*

Over 20 years ago, Joseph Campbell said that contemporary religion was in a “very bad spot.”

*Religion is a constellation of metaphors, and the metaphor points to connotations that are of the spirit, not of history.*

But Western Christianity has changed all this so that each metaphor, such as God's kingdom, becomes literal historical event.

*Myths come from where the heart is, and where the experience is, even as the mind may wonder why people believe these things. The myth does not point to a fact; the myth points beyond facts to something that informs the fact.*

Why did much of Christianity tend to a literal interpretation of the myth? "Because of a strong institutional emphasis" and "a fear of the mystical experience," Campbell said.

And also by reducing the biblical story to mere fact, to something "we know," we can actually deny ourselves the experience of the truth.

To hear the story of Jesus as mere fact—as Pilate did—we can remain unpersuaded and unmoved. But to hear his birth, his miracles, his death and resurrection as myth and metaphor, as poetry, is to be pointed toward the Truth, toward an experience of the Sacred and a personal encounter with the Risen One.

This is the difference between merely eating bread and wine versus eating the body and the blood of Jesus. The sacrament as myth can allude to the Truth that is there for us all along. As Christians we can say that communion with God is the way one experiences truth, and the sacrament as metaphor can help lead us there.

Friends, in these times, let us remember that truth liberates and heals the world. Not just facts, but deep truths such as love and wholeness. And may we remember that truth shines in the darkness and the darkness and lies cannot overcome it.