

Dogma, Mystery, Goodness and Truth
Sept. 22, 2013
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: John 18:32-38

“What is true?” asked Pontius Pilate.

Things had come to a head in the trial of that trouble-maker Jesus Christ. The high priests had tried him and found him guilty. But they needed the Roman government’s participation in going so far as to kill him. That’s how things ended up in front of Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea.

Pilate would have rather avoided the whole affair. John’s account makes it clear that Pilate didn’t think much of Jewish law and hierarchy. But now he was caught in the middle between his authority as governor and his desire for the Jews to keep the peace. Jesus made it clear that he belonged to a different kind of kingdom. Pilate tried to get him to say he thought of himself as king, which would have been clear cause for putting Jesus to death. But Jesus didn’t give him that advantage. Jesus only said that those who belong to the truth listen to his voice.

We don’t have the advantage of hearing Pilate’s inflection. We don’t know if he said it as “*What* is true?” or “What *is* true?” or “What is *true*?” It really doesn’t matter. Either way, Pilate’s response with an open-ended question reveals him as a man far more interested in keeping his power and privilege than in seeking truth. He could have changed history with a different answer, with some backbone, with some conviction and courage. But that was neither his character nor his role in this drama. We know how the rest of the story goes.

Pilate’s non-answer answer reminds me of a story that has always been told about a philosophy professor who gave a very unexpected final exam one year. As the story goes, when his students sat down at their desk, got out their pens and opened their exam booklets, they saw only one word on the exam form, a one-word question: “Why?”

The story goes on. Most students did their best to draw on all the great theories and voices of philosophy they had studied. They filled up their exam booklets with long essays attempting to satisfy the question. They all got the grade of C. One clever fellow thought long and hard about the question and offered a one-word answer “Because.”

He got a B. There was one student who got an A on that exam. His response to the exam question, “Why?” was “Why not?”

I’ve never confirmed whether that story is true but that is the way it is with philosophy, isn’t it? Philosophy is defined as the largely academic study of knowledge, reality and existence. Fun to think about, perhaps. Great exercise for our minds, but highly subjective, a world in which one truth is as good as the next.

We live in a world that seems equally conditional, a sea of subjectivity where all sorts of boats bob along, riding waves of different cultures, contexts, worldviews and religions. It is a time that is often as fascinating as it is confusing, especially when we seek to answer Pontius Pilate’s question, “What is truth?”

As we are seeing in our state and national politics, the truth today is often reduced to a tool, a means to an end that can be forged into all shapes and sizes for all kinds of purposes. Politicians swear “they” are acting out of truth when their opponents swear the same.

People of faith don’t have the same convenience. When we put our faith first and call on it to shape all we think, say and do, we cannot treat the truth as some kind of harmless theory. We can’t back away from Pilate’s question. If we do, we are of no more use to the God of our creation than Pilate was that day.

That must be why the six “Great Ends of the Church” – or purposes – that we are looking at include a charge for every Presbyterian church to “preserve the Truth.” We all know, of course, that it’s just not as simple as a three-word mandate. We might tell ourselves it was for those church leaders who crafted our “Great Ends” about 150 years ago. But I doubt it. Yes, our times are highly diverse and pluralistic, a world where all views seek to be honored. But I bet they felt the same way 150 years ago.

So, then, what does it mean, this old-fashioned phrase, to “preserve the truth?” What is truth, as Pilate asked, and why is it worth our lives to preserve? We might start by stating what truth is *not*. The essence of truth is not dogma or doctrine or personal opinion or perspective.

Yes, it’s true, the church has staked itself out plenty of times in its effort to name the truth. That is what our Adult Christian Education Sunday school class is finding out as it studies our denomination’s historical creeds and confessions. But we Presbyterians admit that each is shaped and bound to some degree by its historical contexts, ranging

from the Protestant Reformation to the rise of Nazism to the social and sexual chaos of the 1960s in America.

When we dig our heels in, we're bound to get in trouble as we were reminded this week by, of all people, Pope Francis. I am sure many of you heard about what he said. The Roman Catholic Church, he said, has lost its balance. It has grown obsessed with preaching about abortion, gay marriage and contraception. The Catholic church, he said, risks diminishing to a "small chapel" rather than a "big tent," a private club focused on doctrine, orthodoxy and a limited agenda of moral teachings rather than caring for the poor and the sick.

He went on to say:

"The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently."

"We have to find a new balance," Pope Francis continued, "otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel."

Can I get an "Amen" for the Pope?

* * *

So, with the Pope's help, we see that truth is not the same as doctrine or dogma frozen in time. We seek the truth not by seeing only black and white, a simple "yes" or "no." We know that our truth is in part mystery. The preservation of truth involves holding it gently in our hands, giving it room to breathe as our God continues to reveal it to us.

We do that with scripture, don't we? We read the Bible not as 66 books that are the same as a set of encyclopedias containing only finite knowledge. As my predecessor Dr. Charlie MacDonald always said, the Bible is not a history text book. Or a science textbook. Nor is it a systematic theology collection or a philosophy book. Nor, mind you, is it a work of fiction. Far from it. It is the true story of God and the people God could not do without. It is the true story of how God loved them, appeared to and guided them and, finally, made them a promise in Christ Jesus.

Reading this story requires us to embrace mystery as part of our faith. We do that when we take communion, as we seek to be sealed to our Lord through a simple loaf of bread

and a cup of juice from the vine. Our faith is in part mystery. We will never know it all or master it all so that we can reduce the story to a list of absolutes.

It has been said that God speaks to us in baby talk because that is about all we can understand of God's vast creation and sovereignty over it. We shouldn't be insulted by that. We should find profound relief, that we can never know it all. What we can do is read and re-read scripture as an overarching, living, breathing narrative, one that is not so much conveyed in its details as its essence, and ask, every day, for God in the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth in its mystery.

* * *

So, that begins to get us somewhere.

Where else can we look for truth?

If it doesn't offend our modern sensibilities too much – much less our southern sensibilities – we might look to another historical statement that came from our Presbyterian brethren in New York and Philadelphia at the close of the 1800s. The opening pages of our church constitution, the Book of Order, include the direction that we can find truth only "in order to goodness." One reveals the other. Truth does not stand alone as an intellectual concept. It took real form and shape in the world and continues to do so, where we can see it and recognize it. The Book of Order reads:

"... we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or embrace it."

In other words, real truth matters for something real, it leads to something concrete. It inspires us to take specific action, to make time in our busy and often self-centered lives to improve the lives of others. We do so not as some abstract expression of what is right or just because it makes us feel good. We do acts of goodness as a response to the model and mandate, the life, death and grace-filled resurrection of Christ Jesus.

Truth in order to goodness means that truth must have value beyond itself. It must take shape, just as God came into the world as a person, beyond God's self, with no other reason than to reveal God's self in a way that we could understand. Truth in order to goodness tells us that truth is reflected in goodness, that because we know what is true in Christ we build the kingdom to which Christ told Pilate he belonged.

* * *

But there is even more. The truth not only transcends dogma or opinion. Truth is seen not only indirectly in goodness. There is the direct truth itself, the truth in the person Jesus Christ. There, truth is revealed in its clearest form, settling on the cross, where Jesus hung for our sake, the cross where God's work in Christ on earth ended and our lives began, the cross that liberated us to love and serve others in Christ's name.

When Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life," we ought not to get hung up on whether that excludes someone. Instead we can say that in Christ we see the difference between life and death. We see the difference between love and indifference. We see the difference between sacrifice and selling out, as Pilate did when he was presented with truth in Christ and chose not to defend it.

So we have been given the answer Pontius Pilate's question, "What is truth?"

In providing that answer, we don't have to feel as though we must fill up an entire exam booklet with long, drawn-out and probably somewhat tortured answers, as with the philosophy exam in the story.

No, we don't have to claim we know it all or pretend we do. I have a quote from the great Christian writer Frederick Buechner on my Facebook profile. He says, "A Christian is one who is on the way, though not necessarily very far along it, and who has at least some dim and half-baked idea of whom to thank."

It's ok to use language like that in expressing our truth to others. In another place, Buechner says, "A Christian is one who points to Christ and says, 'I can't prove a thing, but there is something about his eyes and his voice. There's something about the way he carries his head, the way he carries his cross, the way he carries me.'"

Friends, that is the truth that we can share with others. And, in this interfaith world, we can do so without fear that we are disrespecting or treading on other beliefs. We can simply say, "This is what I have experienced in this character Christ Jesus. This is what I know to be true. It is why we care for the widow and the orphan and stand for justice. It is why we dare to love others as God loved us and why we teach our children to do the same."

Unlike earthly things, sisters and brother, the survival and advancement of the truth actually does not depend on our preserving it or proving it or justifying it. It goes on, all by itself.

But for us, the church, our God of grace affords the privilege, the blessing and the call to preserve this truth by sharing it with others in all we say and all we do.

Amen.