

What is Truth?
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 18:28-40

In a purely cosmic sense, I believe Truth has more things to say to all of us. Just to consider that the universe is literally expanding, that it includes black holes and dying suns and subatomic particles and perhaps even parallel universes. The reality that there are wormholes through space; and that intelligent life on other planets may really exist more than in our imaginations... that's more than many of us can handle.

And if the theory of evolution challenged us theologically 150 years ago, what are the implications for quantum physics?

Culturally, there are limits on truth. Different societies have taught what is true for them and how to know it. We often forget this, but as our culture shifts and changes, so do our understandings. It's not simply that we accumulate new facts but that we put on new lenses that change how we see things.

A long time ago our ancestor's culture shifted from oral storytelling to written communications. Wisdom allowed for laws that were more than just the rulers' desire to gain power and stability, laws which were recorded for posterity. Religious and political leaders began grounding their declarations of truth in their publicized works.

Printed text became available in education, which eventually allowed even the average person the opportunity to pin down complex ideas long enough to follow a logical argument. Publications were distributed to more and more people. Seeing something in print began to give us the impression that what we read or saw was Truth, which is still the case today.

But now there is also such a thing as "Post-truth" – this is the word the Oxford Dictionaries selected as the International English word of the year in 2016, after seeing a 2000% increase in its usage in just one year.

What makes the increased use of "post-truth" so emblematic of our days is the way the prefix "post" is understood. Rather than identifying a time

“after” a specific event or situation as in “post-war,” the prefix is being used to imply that the truth is not important or relevant any longer.

In other words, what the term “Post-truth” says about this particular period we are living through is that self-evident truths no longer seem to matter to people who have developed a perception of reality that is immune to it.

Objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than are appeals to emotion and personal beliefs.

One of the most difficult, challenging and solitary practices required of this otherwise amazing calling to be a pastor is that I am engaged in a ministry of truth-telling in a post-truth world.

Standing behind this pulpit on Sunday knowing that it is your God-given responsibility to say out loud the necessary, discomfoting and, at times, infuriating truth about humanity is not for the faint of heart.

I pray every day that I will have the courage and the wisdom to speak about God’s hope even when my words clash with the reality of a world whose aversion to Truth keeps putting precious lives at risk.

How much easier it would be to line up behind one confident authority who’ll happily decide truth for me! Instead, all I hear in my mind is that iconic scene from the movie Top Gun in which Jack Nicolson’s characters bellows... *“You can’t handle the truth!”* Well, I guess I’ll keep trying.

Pilate was vaguely bored with this little sideshow these religious folk were foisting upon him. His schedule was chockfull of appointments and meetings and P.R. appearances as it was! The last thing he had time for was this pathetic little man who was alleged to be a royal pretender, a usurper of Roman authority, a would-be *“King of the Jews.”*

For some reason this man from that tiny one-horse town Nazareth had them all stirred up. For some reason, the Temple Management thought this guy, who looked like every other average Joe, was some kind of threat. It seemed like they were powerless to get rid of him on their own so they were looking for a little help from him.

It was the last thing Pilate needed that day. There he sat behind his marble desk, idly drumming his fingers on his desk blotter. He barely even looked up at Jesus as he distractedly asked, *"So, are you the king of the Jews or what?"*

Pilate stifled a yawn awaiting the man's response, which involved some jibber-jabber about where his kingdom was. This Jesus character was so evasive. Why wouldn't he just answer the simple question for crying out loud?

"What is truth?"

Was Pilate being cynical? Was he a postmodern philosopher 2,000 years ahead of his time? Was he intending to be flippant or ironic? It's hard to say. Maybe we hear in Pilate's words the thought that all people eventually have when they wonder "What's it all about anyway? What is the secret, the meaning of life?"

Our human attempts to answer these questions typically lead us in the direction of this world's Pontius Pilates: the rich, the powerful, the beautiful, the well-dressed and upwardly mobile types to whose rising stars we gladly hitch our wagons.

But the "truth" of this scene is that the beat-up, dirty, handcuffed man who spoke softly and confusingly, really was the King of kings. The upside-down nature of his kingdom is not what you think it is. The secret of life, the true path to shalom turns us away from the Pilates of this world and in the direction of the humble man from Nazareth who was even then was preparing to sacrifice himself for all.

If Jesus and his followers wanted to force a win, then naturally they would use the primary tool this world provides for establishing and keeping power: which violence. But Jesus will not establish his claims by violence. Jesus will not usher in God's kingdom through violence. Jesus will make no followers being violent.

Rather, Jesus has come to witness to the truth that God is love (John 3:16), and that because we have not seen God and have such a hard time imagining God (John 1:18), our feeble imaginations are dominated by our experience.

Rather than imagining God is love, we imagine God to be violent because we live in a world of violence.

Rather than recognize the cross as a symbol of sacrificial love, we remember it as the mechanism used to punish Jesus on our behalf because we have way too much experience with punitive relationships.

Rather than believe that God's grace and acceptance are absolutely unconditional, we assume God offers these gifts only on the condition that we fear, obey, and praise God – and despise those who don't – because so much of our life is quid pro quo.

But Jesus is not of this world. And therefore his followers will not fight for him because to bring the kingdom about by violence is to violate the very principles with which it was created and therefore guarantee its destruction.

Could there be a more timely passage to reflect upon in these days?

We live in a world dominated by the view that the only answer to violence is more violence. And the end result of that is death.

Does that mean Christ calls us to be pacifists? Some traditions – particularly Mennonite, Quaker, and Church of the Brethren – have given vivid testimony to the power of Christian non-violence. These courageous and counter-cultural witnesses have at times shaken the powers that be and cannot and should not be quickly discarded.

On the other hand, many followers of Christ believe that temporal authorities like armies and law enforcement have a critical role to play in creating a more orderly and just world. Standing in this tradition, I think the perpetrators of violence should be opposed and brought to justice whenever possible so that there is less brokenness and pain in the world.

But as a member of the Church and a follower of Christ, I know there are limits to the reach and outcome of force.

As Martin Luther King, Jr., a champion for Christian non-violence, wrote;

"The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you

do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. ¹

What I think at this point, as I look again at a world that seems less safe for my children than the one in which I grew up, is that we gather this Sunday to pray and to witness. We ask God to comfort those who mourn, to change the hearts of those who can see no other way forward but through violence, and to equip all of us to work for a peace born of equity, for only such a peace will last.

And after our praying, we are called to witness:
to the One who demonstrated power through weakness,
who manifested strength through vulnerability,
who established justice through mercy,
and who built the kingdom of God by embracing a confused, chaotic, and violent world, taking its pain into his own body, dying the death it sought, and rising again to remind us that light is stronger than darkness and love is always stronger than hate.

That, is truth.

And if you have ever felt unsure of what you believe; if you struggle with doubts and uncertain that there is any real truth that matters; it is okay. You are not alone.

Just listen to the voice that calls you to love boldly, to change your mind, to open your heart to the peace of God and let it permeate your life. Bear good fruit. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."²

May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.

¹ "Where do we go from here: Chaos or community?" (1967)

² Romans 15:13, NRSV