

John 8:12, 28-36
June 13, 2021
Graduation Sunday
"You Will Know the Truth"
Rev. Randy Smith

You won't know it unless you have recently read through the whole Gospel of John, but there is in this Gospel -- in *strong contrast* to the first three Gospels -- an *intense concern* for "**truth**". E.g., in Matthew, Mark and Luke, the word "truth" appears a total of 6 times. In John, however, the word appears 21 times in the Gospel's 21 chapters -- an average of once every chapter.

Why is this? One reason is that by the time the Gospel of John was written - likely some time between 95-105 AD, or a generation or so later than the other three Gospels -- an *intense conflict* had evolved, for a variety of reasons, between the earliest Christians -- *all* of whom were Jews -- and their fellow *non-Christian* Jews. And that context of conflict leads this Gospel writer to paint Jesus' conflicts with the Jewish religious leaders in a more *extreme* way.

E.g., the reading this morning from Jn. 8 draws us into an *extended*, and quite *vicious* argument going between Jesus and a group of Pharisees and Scribes in the courts of the Jerusalem Temple. They are doing all in their power to *discredit* him and *undermine* his teaching, and Jesus is not the least bit patient with them, saying to them at one point, "Why do I [even] speak to you at all?" (v. 25). What is going on is a *fight* for **legitimacy**: which of them -- the Jewish religious leaders or Jesus -- is **telling the truth about God**? Apparently all that Jesus has brought to them in terms of **new ways** of *understanding who* God is, and *what* God wills for his Covenant People to **do** in the world, has left them, *not* enlightened, but rather *threatened*.

Such that, when Jesus makes the hallmark statement he makes in this passage -- "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know **the truth**, and the truth will make you **free**." (8:31-32) -- the religious leaders go on the *defensive*, and fall back on the **story** of their **family story** -- "We are descendants of Abraham" -- and then go on to make the very *odd* claim -- *given* the Egyptian part of their story, and the fact that they live *in that time* as a subject people of the Roman Empire -- that they "have never been slaves to anyone".

Jesus, however, seizes on their statement to talk, not about *actual* slavery but about slavery to *sin*, and goes on to say, "I *know* that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word" (8:37). The point is this: "Yes, you are descendants of Abraham. But you *misunderstand* what is at the *heart* of your "family **story**", and so you *misinterpret* how it is you are meant to live in the world as Abraham's

family. If you did *not*, you would not be plotting even *now* to **kill** me!" (Which, by the way, they really *were*.)

"**Who is telling the truth about God?**" is at the core of all the religious conflict you've ever witnessed or heard of. This is true both *within* and *between* different Christian churches (denominations), and also, of course, *between* Christianity and *other* religious traditions. E.g., within our own United Methodist Church, we have been engaged in an **extended** and -- at times -- **vicious** argument over the status of non-heterosexual persons within our denomination, an argument so *consequential* that it will likely lead -- likely *beginning* next year -- to one or more new denominations splitting off from the United Methodist Church. I say this because one of those split-off groups -- which is *opposed* to the full inclusion of non-heterosexual people -- has already formed and named itself as the "Global Methodist Church", and is **raring** to get started, *officially*, as their own denomination.

But, are they telling the truth about God? What about the group which **endorses** full inclusion of non-heterosexual persons? Are either -- or *both*? -- so **enmeshed** in *their story* -- in their **particular** understanding of God, and in their **particular** interpretation of how they should live in the world as Jesus' new family, the Church, that they can't really **know** the truth about God in order to *tell* it? Trying to answer this question is **hard, complicated**, but **essential**: it is in **understanding the truth about God, and responding faithfully**, in the way we live and relate with others, that we are **freed from slavery to sin**.

Jesus promises those who respond positively to him that "you **will** know the truth, and the truth **will** make you free". This is comforting. But, **how** will we know the truth? Two things help us here. One is the truly intriguing declaration Jesus makes about himself, just a few chapters later, in Jn. 14:6, where he says, "**I am...the truth...**" It is intriguing because he *doesn't* say, "I have come to **tell** you truth" but rather that **he, himself, is** the truth. He offers no theological propositions, no logical arguments, no experimental evidence. Just himself. As the truth.

And then, a couple of chapters after that, Jesus says to his first followers that -- in the time following his being put to death, and being raised from the dead -- they need not worry about his continuing to be *with* them, to **guide** them. "When the Spirit of truth comes," Jesus says, "he will guide you into *all* the truth", because, Jesus goes on to say, "he will not **speak** on his own, but will speak whatever he hears [*viz.*, from Jesus], and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (16:13).

So, **how** will we know the truth? We just keep **looking** to Jesus. His **whole life**: *who* he was, *how* he was, what he *did*, what he *said*. And then we **listen** for his voice to guide us in "the things that are to come" -- not just what lies ahead for

we who are the Church, but *which* future is the *faithful* -- viz., the *truthful* -- **future** for the Church to move toward. Can you *imagine* the Church as a body of followers of Jesus who are -- instead of trying to beat each other up with their **own particular** truth -- committed to **looking** to Jesus, and *helping* one another to practice *doing* what we *all* see, and then *helping* one another in **listening** for Jesus' voice, and then *do* what we hear him telling us to do?

Jesus can, and *does* imagine a Church *just like that*.

And if we **could** be Church in that way, what a *witness* to Jesus we might be able to make to the world around us, a world in which the **status of truth** -- I would say -- is utterly *imperiled*. A friend of mine back a few years ago said it well. He said we are living in a time when, just by switching from one cable news network to another, you discover *not* just a different "**spin**" on the truth, but rather a **different truth** -- a different **reality** -- altogether. And I believe this development this puts the status of our **whole society** in *peril*.

When I compare the world the Class of '21 has grown up in and the world I grew up in, I think of Walter **Cronkite**. I fear that name, however, will mean *nothing* to any members of the Class of '21 (*except*, I *hope*, to Mass Communications major, Ethan Treece). For the rest of you, you'll just have to take my word for it, that there really was, once upon a time, a world in which *most* Americans watched the *same* news guy on TV, a man on the CBS network, by the name of Walter Cronkite. And he would conclude his 30-minute news report every evening by saying, "**And that's the way it is**," and then give the day and the date. And the **vast majority** of Americans, for at least *most* of the 19 years he was on (1962-1981), *agreed* that *was* the way it *was*.

Few, if any, Americans would have thought, i.e., that Cronkite was *inventing* the truth, or *twisting* the truth, in trying to manipulate them for the sake of promoting one political point of view, or party, over another. He was, after all, a **journalist**, a key figure in the great American experiment with self-government ever since the Bill of Rights guaranteed freedom of the press. But now, it's **all-out war**. Everybody is *quite* sure the people on the *other* network are **liars**, and not *just* liars but *malicious, conspiratorial liars*.

Although you have to wonder if this even really *matters* much anymore, given that we arrived a *while* ago -- via so-called Social Media -- in a world in which there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of different websites and YouTube channels which feed people *only* the information and opinions they *prefer* to hear, 24/7/365, and do so with zero accountability to anyone. Which means there are hundreds, if not thousands, of different **versions of truth** -- versions of *reality* -- which Americans are now living in, and clinging to.

And how long can a society sustain itself in such a situation?

It is **seriously tempting**, for *most* of us, to get caught up in what you might call these "**truth wars**" because, in fact, questions which are absolutely fundamental to our American way of life are always under debate.

Which makes it **seriously important** that we remember Jesus not only says, "You will know **the truth**", but also that "the truth will make you *free*." Insofar as any of us, i.e., *as followers of Jesus*, becomes, or *has become* **more devoted** to *any* of those million different versions of truth **than we are to Jesus**, and to **his Church**, we are **still not free**, are **still enslaved to sin**, because we are not free to **understand the truth about God, and faithfully respond, to what God wills for us, in terms of the way we live, and relate with others**. Our lives have become, i.e. -- whether we realize it or not -- *captive* to *other stories*, stories which cannot -- *legitimately* -- be derived from *looking* to Jesus, or *listening* to the Spirit of Jesus.

Can you imagine a Church, so unified in their devotion to Jesus as the Truth, that they can say to the world around -- whose grasp of truth is now completely splintered -- "We know, and are guided in everything, and so are able to live together peaceably, by one truth, and it is Jesus"?

Jesus can, and *does* imagine a Church *just like that*.
Every day.