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Truth

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Truth¹

John Milloy²

Text: Psalm 85

“Do I look good in this outfit? Tell me the truth.”

How many of us live in absolute terror of that question? Or all the related ones:

“Do you like my new tie?”

“What do you think of my new girlfriend or boyfriend?”

“Can you tell that I put on weight during the pandemic?”

“Do you think everyone enjoyed my sermon?”

“Be honest with me – I want to know the truth.”

Especially for those of us who teach a bit of Kantian ethics in their courses, these types of questions are a minefield. Is telling your best friend that their new romantic interest is a buffoon or your colleague that their sermon was a unique combination of boring and incomprehensible examples of truth-telling – even when both statements are quite accurate?

What is “truth”? Pilate asked Jesus that question some 2000 years ago. Unfortunately, if you go back and review the transcript – he never gave Jesus the chance to answer. As a result, we are left trying to piece together the concept of Truth – specifically what Truth means in the Christian tradition.

Some may wonder what all the fuss is about – isn’t it simple. The world is neatly divided into facts and opinions. Facts represent truth and opinions are... well opinions.

Grass is green is a fact.

The sky is blue is a fact.

2 plus 2 equals four is a fact.

It all seems rather straightforward - doesn’t it? And then I was listening to a conservative commentator on a US news channel a few weeks ago talking about the pro-Palestinian demonstrations taking place across the United States. “Do you know why those people are protesting?” she asked the viewers. And her answer - and I quote – “because each and every one of them is anti-Semitic” ... And that’s a fact” – she added triumphantly.

¹ This sermon was preached at Open Door, the weekly worship of Martin Luther University College on November 8, 2023. It was part of a series that asked those preaching to provide a response from their own faith tradition to the Seven Sacred Teachings (Grandfather/Grandmother) found in Indigenous culture; Bravery, Wisdom, Humility, Love, Truth, Respect, and Honesty.

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And I realized that we don't really deal in opinions much anymore – watch TV news, review other sorts of media, check your Twitter feed, or look at Facebook and you can learn lots of “facts”:

Vaccines save lives.
Vaccines cause autism.
Climate change is real.
Climate change is a hoax.
The lockdown saved lives.
The lockdown was unnecessary, caused mental health problems and set our kids back.
Donald Trump had the most attendees at his inauguration of any US President.
Barack Obama had the most attendees at his inauguration.

And all of these – we are told are facts – often supported by that killer phrase designed to end all debate: “There are studies, you know!”

We don't seem to spend much time debating the pros and cons of issues anymore. Instead, we seem to spend most of our time arguing about the underlying facts and rarely agreeing. Maybe Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway nailed it when she spoke of the concept of people having “alternative facts”, leading me to think of the words of that great 20th Century thinker - David Byrne – lead singer of the *Talking Heads* – who in his song *Cross Eyed and Painless* explained:

Facts are simple and facts are straight
Facts are lazy and facts are late
Facts all come with points of view
Facts don't do what I want them to
Facts just twist the truth around
Facts are living turned inside out
Facts are getting the best of them
Facts are nothing on the face of things³

No wonder – it was the last song in their movie – *Stop Making Sense*.

We appear to be living in a post-truth world which makes the task of explaining the concept of truth very difficult. So, what if we change course – and go back several weeks ago to another concept that we explored at *Open Door* – humility.

In my opinion – the concept of humility is closely tied to the concept of truth because at its core, humility is about truth – the truth about us. Humility is about recognizing who we really are – the whole package – the good, the bad, and the ugly. It's about fully acknowledging our entire being and that can be pretty scary.

In fact, if we really did focus on the truth about ourselves, could any of us really function? Could any of us get out of bed in the morning without telling ourselves all those little lies and half-truths that get us through the day – that we aren't really that selfish, indifferent, or hard hearted?

³ Talking Heads, “Cross Eyed and Painless,” *Remain in Light*, Sire Records, 1980.

I doubt it. No, if you want to search for truth – I wouldn't start with us. So where do we look? Let me turn to two commentators. One from the mid-20th Century and one more contemporary.

The first many of you may have heard of – Brian Wilson – who soared to prominence in the 1960s as part of a school of thought called the *Beach Boys*. In a philosophical treatise written in 1963, Wilson proposed a thought experiment involving a loud braggart trying to put down another person's high school. What should the response be? Asked Wilson.

His answer - "Be true to your school." Be true to your school... Suddenly we have another concept of truth... one that we occasionally use but probably don't think about much.

You are a true friend.
I must stay true to my values.
Be true to yourself.

Truth has a different meaning here – in fact a more powerful meaning. It means loyalty. It means faithfulness.

Which leads me to my second thinker, the Canadian academic Jeffrey Dudiak whose work I have drawn upon for a great deal of today's sermon. Although not as well-known as Brian Wilson, Dudiak has spent a great deal of time thinking about truth and argues that in the Christian context truth is not about facts. Truth is about faithfulness.

Faithfulness is different from facts. Facts are passive while truth needs to be demonstrated over and over again. Think about it. We don't call someone a true friend because you had fun with them at a party on Saturday night. No, we call them a true friend because we know that they will always be there for you – continuously working to deepen your relationship.

Christians – according to Dudiak – are called to do the same – to understand truth as our call to be faithful to God, each other, and creation. And more importantly, to understand God's faithfulness towards us. Truth is therefore relational. It is about our relationships with each other and with God and like all things relational, it involves love. A true friend is a loving friend. When Jesus said, I am the way, the truth and the life he wasn't offering a definition for us to memorize or put in Wikipedia.

No, when Jesus says that he is "truth," it is an acknowledgement of his love for each of us and an invitation to be part of a faith-filled relationship. Which brings us to Psalm 85 – such a beautiful glimpse into a world transformed by the hand of God. And how is it transformed? Recall the words of that Psalm.

Love and truth will meet;
Justice and peace will kiss.
Truth will spring from the earth
Justice will look down from heaven.

The Psalmist is talking about the future – about the end of a journey.

And when you understand Truth as faithfulness, you are also talking about a journey which brings us back to our friend Dudiak and his efforts to differentiate facts from truth. Facts, according to Dudiak are about now, while truth is about the future. He points out that Jesus talked a great deal about the Kingdom of God and contrasted it with the Kingdom of

earth. The Kingdom of earth is what exists today – with all its problems, weaknesses, and challenges. The Kingdom of heaven meanwhile represents the possibilities of our world – what we haven't yet achieved. Truth is about what we need to work towards. Let me quote from Dudiak:

The fact is that we live in a world that is at war; the truth is that we are called to peace. The fact is that the world is filled with inequality and oppression; the truth is love and forgiveness. The fact is that we are hopelessly divided against each other; the truth is that in the Kingdom there is neither male nor female, Greek nor Jew, conservative nor liberal.⁴

This is the Christian journey. Is it easy? No. Is it quick? Not at all. Is it as much about the journey as the destination? Absolutely. In fact, you might describe our efforts to achieve truth as being somewhat turtle-like.

Leading us to today's teaching about truth. Truth, according to Indigenous wisdom, is represented by the turtle – how fitting – a being who lives life in a slow and meticulous manner – who understands the importance of the journey and the destination. Truth, according to this wisdom, is a call to apply faith and trust in your teachings. It is a call to understand your place in this life and apply that understanding in the way that you walk.

So, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter whether you tell your friend that you like their new outfit or what arguments you choose to bring to even the most controversial topic. What matters is whether you do so in a loving and faithful manner. The same is true when it comes to our understanding of ourselves. Humility may involve understanding our weaknesses or our strengths but that is not the end of the discussion.

As Pastor Allen Jorgenson, who preached on the topic of humility as part of this series reminded us: humility is understanding that we are nothing separate from our relationship with God and the larger community – a relationship that is loving – a relationship that is faithful – a relationship that reflects truth in the most powerful sense of the word.

⁴ Jeffrey Dudiak, *Post Truth? Facts and Faithfulness*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2022), pg. 17.