



“Truth or Truthiness?”

Scripture – John 8:31-47

Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, January 14, 2018

When our son was in high school, we took him on several college trips to help him find the school that was right for him. When we toured Miami University in Ohio – the school he decided to attend, and coincidentally, Sudie’s Alma Mater – there was a point on the tour when we came to Upham Hall, a building located in the center of campus. In the middle of that academic building is an arch, and according to Miami folklore, couples who kiss under the arch will marry. This is known as a Miami merger.

So, the question for this morning is: Sudie, did you ever...No! We will not ask her that question! The question is this: What *words* are on the arch of Upham Hall? And it is not “Get your Miami Merger here.” Neither will you find a memorable quote of a former president of the university. The words that are etched into the stone arch of this public university are the words of Jesus from this morning’s passage in the Gospel of John: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.”

Interestingly, Upham Hall is not the only public building where these words are inscribed in stone. The Original Headquarters Building of the CIA was designed in the mid-1950s and etched into the wall of the main lobby is this biblical verse which characterizes the CIA’s mission: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.”¹

Yes, it sounds ironic that a government organization known for its secretive practices and skilled in the art of deception would have this biblical verse as a key to its mission, but in fact the ultimate goal of much of its work is to sift through lies and deceit in order to uncover the truth.

Truth is not exactly enjoying its heyday currently, is it? It is not as bad as Germany in the 1930s when a campaign of lies persuaded the nation to blame its troubles and fears on Jews, the LGBTQ community, gypsies and people with mental illness, but I have not seen in my lifetime such widespread lying and such dogged determination to ignore the truth.

Living in an era when lies are disseminated routinely, and people manufacture stories to bolster their opinions, it is essential for people of faith to ratchet up our demand for truth. The ninth commandment declares that God expects people of faith to “not bear false witness.” The word “truth” appears more than 20 times in the Gospel of John and more than 90 times in the New Testament. We who follow Jesus should be alarmed about the downhill slide from Truth with a capital “T” to truth with a small “t” to “*my* truth” to “truthiness” to “alternative facts.”

A colleague notes that a dozen years ago “The Internet idealists were hoping that more voices would allow truth to rise to the top, that there would be a democratizing of ideals, and the World Wide Web would allow more room for truth.”² It has not exactly turned out that way, has it? Instead, routinely we see totally fictitious stories blaze across the Internet like an out-of-control California wildfire and gobbled up by people who want to believe the malarkey, regardless of well-documented facts to the contrary.

While we are to *seek* the truth and *speak* the truth, the Letter to the Ephesians declares that we are to “speak the truth *in love*.” That is, truth-seeking should not be motivated by a desire to humiliate or scold. Neither should it be a strategy for elevating ourselves to a position of superiority. We do not pursue the truth in order to bludgeon those who cling to their alternative facts; we pursue truth because relationships and communities collapse when they are undermined by lies and deception.

Marriages crumble when a spouse is deceitful. Families splinter when individuals are dishonest with each another. Citizens become contentious when lies poison the atmosphere of their community.

I am not talking about innocent white lies. All of us know that there are some situations when an innocent fib is the best course of action. You may have seen the commercial where Abraham Lincoln is standing behind his wife. She has just put on a new dress and asks, “Does this dress make me look fat?” Honest Abe is unable to utter a single syllable, because what he is expected to say would not be the truth.

When a man asks his spouse, “Do I still have the right stuff?” he is not asking for a response that would pass a lie detector test.

Our country is not facing a problem with white lies that are intended to avoid being cruel. We are facing an epidemic of lying that is intended to deceive, incite, and divide.

With the technology at our disposal today, anyone can spread any message and can do it with no regard for the truth. People have always found ways to spread propaganda and there have always been hoards of gullible people who will lap it up, but with the Internet, it is far easier to do, it can be disseminated to a much wider audience, and it can be done in seconds.

The Ten Commandments are bedrock principles for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. They are also foundational principles for healthy societies. Among the restrictions named in the 10 Commandments are: Do not kill, steal, commit adultery, covet, or bear false witness.

Each time you come into our sanctuary, look up at this stained glass window with an image of the two stone tablets and remember these core convictions. The Church is vital to society because we uphold essential moral standards.

I am not exactly certain what I believe about the devil, but I know that there is an evil, chaotic force in the world that tempts people to speak words and commit actions that are destructive to human community. One of the chief works of the prince of darkness is deceit. People of faith are expected to expose lies and to combat them with the truth.

Yet, that is not all we are called to do with regards to the truth. In addition to combating fake news and alternative facts, God also expects us to speak the truth even when it is not the popular thing to do. While I am confident that none of us will ever be mistaken for Jesus, and I doubt anyone will picture one of us as Isaiah or Amos, there are still occasions when we must speak with a prophetic voice.

Have you ever heard of Benjamin Lay? He lived in Abington, Pennsylvania in the 1700s. Lay was an odd little man. A dwarf, he stood just a smidgen over four feet tall. His head was unusually large for such a tiny frame, his legs were so slender that people wondered how they kept his body erect, and he was called a hunchback because of an extreme curvature of his spine. He referred to himself as “Little Benjamin,” but he thought of himself as “Little David” who struck down Goliath.³

Many of us know that Quakers were strong abolitionists who helped run the Underground Railroad which liberated slaves from southern slave owners and resettled them in the North. However, Lay was a Quaker who lived at a time when Quakers were slave owners and “when slavery seemed to many people around the world as natural and unchangeable as the sun, the moon, and the stars.”⁴

“On September 19th, 1738, Little Benjamin walked into the Quaker meetinghouse for the biggest event of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. He wore a great coat, which hid a military uniform and a sword. Beneath his coat Lay carried a hollowed-out book with a secret compartment, into which he had tucked a tied-off animal bladder filled with bright red pokeberry juice. Because Quakers had no formal minister, people spoke as the spirit moved them...(Lay waited as others spoke, but) finally he rose...Many Quakers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey had grown rich on Atlantic commerce, and many owned slaves. To them Lay announced in a booming voice that God Almighty respects all peoples equally, rich and poor, men and women, white and black. He said that slave keeping was the greatest sin in the world and asked, ‘How can a people who profess the golden rule keep slaves?’ He then threw off his coat, revealing the military garb, the book and the blade. (With all eyes fixed on him, Lay thundered) ‘Thus shall God shed the blood of those persons who enslave their fellow creatures!’ And with that, he pulled out the sword, raised the book above his head, and plunged the sword through it. People gasped as the red liquid gushed down his arm. To the shock of all, he splattered the fake blood on the slave owners and prophesied a dark future. Any Quaker who owned slaves must expect physical, moral and spiritual death.”⁴ The room erupted in chaos and several men dragged Lay out of the meeting.

For nearly 25 years, Lay showed up at various Quaker meetings around Philadelphia and confronted slave owners over their complicity in the evil of owning human beings. One time he even temporarily kidnapped the child of slaveholders, so they could get a taste of “how Africans felt when their relatives were sold overseas.”⁵

Lay became well-known throughout Pennsylvania as people shared stories about him and the ideas he professed. Of course, many claimed that Lay was “diseased in his intellect and cracked in the head.”⁶ This is the kind of treatment people can receive when they speak an unpopular truth. This weekend is a marker on the calendar to remember the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and how standing up for the truth led to his assassination.

I suspect none of us will face death threats for standing up for the truth that all people are created in God’s image, regardless of their race, their sexual orientation, their religion, their immigration status, or their economic standing. We risk being slandered and ostracized, and we may have to endure other reprisals.

But what is the alternative? To accommodate our faith to popular opinion? To substitute alternative facts for the truth?

Dr. King said, “He who lives with untruth lives in spiritual slavery. Freedom is still the bonus we receive for knowing the truth.”

If you name Jesus as your Lord and commit to following his way, you will know the truth that emanates from loving God and your neighbor, and the truth will make you free.

NOTES

1. <https://fas.org/irp/cia/product/facttell/building.htm>
2. Carol Howard Merritt, "Truth and revelation," *The Christian Century*, March 13, 2017.
3. Marcus Rediker, "The Cave-Dwelling Vegan Who Took on Quaker Slavery and Won," *Smithsonian*, September 2017, page 36.
4. Ibid.
5. Wikipedia quoting Maria Fleming, *A Place at the Table: Struggles for Equality in America*, (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 33.
6. Rediker, "The Cave-Dwelling Vegan Who Took on Quaker Slavery and Won."

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Justice and Mercy, Wisdom and Truth —

Long ago you gave order to the watery chaos, and called forth a world to sustain life. You delighted in the work of your hands ... but we denied the goodness in ourselves and others, and rejected your gift of abundant life. So you sent prophets to proclaim your vision of *Shalom* — of a world where the desert blossoms and the despised belong, and all creation flourishes. When this was not enough for us, you sent your son to reveal the way, the truth, and the life ... to offer us, again, your gift of grace.

In every age you draw near to us — teaching us to love, opening us to truth, inviting us to embrace the promise of abundant life.

O God, we crave the day when every person in every land enjoys this promise. So, — in faith — we lift to you our sorrow, our longing, and our fierce hope:

We pray for the people of southern California, who have endured fire and flood, and now rake through the rubble looking for treasured remnants of a life buried in mud. In a season marked by disaster after disaster, we add our prayers for this region to those already uttered — prayers for communities that are struggling to rebuild, even as they grieve the loss of life, of stability, of home. Creator God, when our own world seems thrust into chaos, we long for your Spirit to move again over creation and call forth life and light.

We pray also for the people of our community, and for dear ones whom we hold in our hearts this day. We remember those who have no homes to shelter them on cold winter nights, and who must rely on the hospitality of strangers for safety and warmth. We remember those who are suffering in body, mind, or spirit, and who seek the comfort that you — alone — can bring. Loving God, when brokenness and pain plague our communities, we long for you to breathe your healing Spirit upon all in need of care.

God of *Shalom* — You dream of the day when all creation experiences wholeness, and call us to claim and proclaim this vision. On this weekend, when we celebrate the life and legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we pray for the day when this dream becomes reality ... the day when justice takes root in every neglected neighborhood, and peace blossoms in every war-torn land, and all your children will be able to join hands and sing: "Free at last, Free at last, Great God a-mighty, We are free at last."¹ Inspire us, empower us, send us — we pray — to be prophets of your *Shalom*, until that blessed day dawns.

We lift this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ — the one who opened the way to your kingdom, and taught us to pray for its arrival: **Our Father ...**

¹ From the African American Spiritual, "Free at Last," as quoted in Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream ..." speech.