

HANDLING TRUTH
Sermon for Easter 5A: Jn 14:1-14
LPC, 5/14/17

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men were created equal, and that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness...

You will recognize this as a quotation from the Declaration of Independence, substantially written by Thomas Jefferson, founding father of the United States and our third president. The man had a way with words, no doubt about it.

I wonder if anyone today could speak of “self-evident truths” and not be laughed off the stage. Truth, especially self-evident truth, seems to be a slipperier concept today than it was nearly two-and-a-half centuries ago. Given the current political climate, it seems like nothing can be claimed publicly without its veracity being challenged, even with data behind it and corroborating testimony.

Apparently however, even Thomas Jefferson’s self-evident truths were not self-evident to everybody, or slavery would not have survived as long as it did. Jefferson himself clearly had a complex understanding of the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, because he himself continued to own other people throughout his life.

Of course people have quibbled for years about the meaning of “all men,” interpreting that phrase to be “all white men of property,” and preferring to ignore the implication that the race of “men” might also ever include people with two “x” chromosomes.

We know that truth can be “cherry-picked:” presented selectively to support individual views that may end up being far from truth in any existential sense. “The Devil can cite scripture for his purpose,” as Shakespeare said. Then, too, persons with enough power and influence can say whatever they want and call it truth. In George Orwell’s famous dystopic novel *1984* the government’s organ for propaganda was called “the Ministry of Truth,” and it disseminated anything but truth in the interest of defending the state.

Then there is the matter of how much truth the human mind can even absorb, even if nothing but provable facts are presented to it. Jack Nicholson, playing Marine Col. Jessep in the movie *A Few Good Men*, famously tells the young lieutenant questioning him, “You can’t handle the truth!” Can we even handle the truth when it’s presented to us?

The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth turns out to be a more complex concept than would first appear. We might well ask, with Pontius Pilate, “What is truth?”

If you don’t recognize this reference, it is from the scene of Jesus’ pre-crucifixion trial as described in the Gospel of John. John is the only Gospel in which Pilate says “What is truth?” Matthew, Mark and Luke do not include that detail. Matthew, Mark and Luke do not appear to be nearly as concerned with the concept of truth as John is. The Greek word for truth *ἀλήθεια* (*aletheia*) occurs once in Matthew, and three times each in Mark and Luke. John uses the word a whopping twenty-five times.

Of the four Gospel writers, John was possibly the one most influenced by Hellenistic (that is, Greco-Roman) philosophy. According to Hellenistic philosophical principals, truth had a fairly specific meaning that made it synonymous with “reality.” For the Greeks, truth was the opposite of illusion, and had connotations of both factuality and propriety.

At the same time, according to Baptist scholar Andreas J. Köstenberger, the Hebrew words translated truth in the Old Testament, *emeth*, or *emunah*, meant *God’s* truth, connoting faithfulness and righteousness, reliability and sureness. In this sense, truth is the opposite of faithlessness, apostasy and uncertainty. Köstenberger says that in John’s Gospel the meaning of truth combines both Hebrew and Greek meanings in the person of Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate reality, the opposite of illusion, embodying God’s faithfulness and righteousness.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life,” as we heard today. As Christians, however difficult truth is to nail down in the world around us, we find truth in Jesus Christ. What is truth? Truth is Jesus. Jesus is truth.

But here is where it starts to get squirrely again. Is the truth that gives shape and meaning to Christian life the Jesus who refused to cast the first stone or the Jesus who pointed a finger at the Pharisees and called them hypocrites? Does truth lie in Jesus saying, “Whoever is not against us is for us?” (as he does in Mark and Luke) or in Jesus saying, “he who is not with me is against me” (as he does in Matthew)? Is it the Jesus who refuses to fight back when arrested or the Jesus who violently turned over the tables in the Temple? The Jesus who welcomes the woman who has had five husbands or the Jesus who condemns divorce?

And, when Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” does that mean that none of the righteous Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and pagans we know, are saved, even when they live lives that by any analysis conform to Christian principles of love, service and forgiveness without using explicitly Christian language?

At some point I think we have to acknowledge that truth, like God Godself, is bigger than we can imagine. The things we may take as self-evident truths may turn out to be partial truths or illusions. They may be like training wheels: beliefs that are true and useful at certain stages but not eternally.

Does this mean that all truth is relative? As St. Paul would say, “by no means!” Being a Christian means believing that ultimate truth exists, while conceding that such a truth may be as apparently contradictory as a man who is also God, or a God who is three but also one.

Being a Christian means never stopping to strive for truth, knowing that truth may always be beyond our reach. William Sparrow, Dean of Virginia Seminary in the 1800’s, famously told his students, “Seek the truth, come whence it may, cost what it will.” The Christian is unafraid of truth, because truth by definition comes from Christ and leads to Christ. And this must be true for faithful seekers of truth even when they do not give truth the name of Jesus as we do.

As for the question of whether we can handle the truth, I’m not sure any of us can. How can we handle something that is so much greater than we are? But we can seek the truth. We must always seek truth. And, as Jesus says elsewhere in John’s truth-obsessed Gospel, the truth will set us free.