

“What Is Truth?”

*a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Nov, 7, 2021
based on John 1:6-14*

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth.”

I want to use this sermon to focus on that last word – truth. It’s at the heart of the Adult Ed study we are engaged in -- looking closely at the book, *Who Stole My Bible*, but also because it is such a huge issue today when more and more people are playing fast and loose with it and fewer and fewer are holding others to account.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan was fond of saying, “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion but not his own facts.” That may be the most important statement made by anyone in government in our lifetime.

We live in an age where people will say almost anything and think it’s fine or, (and this is just as bad) they will *believe* almost anything. Why is that? The Scottish historian, Niall Ferguson has one idea. He is a conservative historian who works out of the Hoover Institution at Stanford.

He tells us that what is happening in America and the world today is not, as most of us think, akin to the 1930s when Hitler grew more and more powerful, nor is it akin to the 1970s when we had Watergate. These are interesting comparisons but they are not entirely germane. A more apt comparison, says Ferguson, is what happened in the mid-to late 1500s. Let me explain.

The structure of the public sphere has changed so much because of the internet, he says. So much so that it makes comparisons to the ‘30s and ‘70s irrelevant.

Ferguson argues that nothing has happened like the impact of the personal computer/ smart phone since the impact of the printing press 500 years ago.

If you look at a graph comparing the price and quantity of printed books from 1500 to 1635, with a graph comparing the price and quantity of the personal computer/ smart phone from 1975 – 2005, the graphs are identical. They aren’t just alike – they are the same.

What’s the difference? The time scale. History today happens ten times faster.

Some thought that with the coming of the internet everything would be wonderful. Every person could tell his own truth, unfettered by the powers that control the media.

Well, that is true, with the coming of age of Facebook nearly everyone has become a blogger, except that 99.9% of these ideologues, shouting their opinions in social media are just ditto heads spouting the opinions of others who have no filters at all.

In the 1960s the CBS television anchor, Walter Cronkite, always wanted to be sure that what he was saying on the 6 o'clock news had some truth behind it. He knew his integrity depended on it. If there was doubt, he'd hold back.

That is no longer a value for most, and it has made us all poorer.

You know – something similar happened during the Protestant Reformation.

Martin Luther said, if everyone could read the Bible in his own language everything would be great, “We will achieve the priesthood of all believers that the Bible speaks of.”

He said. “The word of every lay person would, ostensibly, be as good as that of every priest.”

Well, the Bible *was* produced in great numbers and it *did* have a huge effect, but other things were printed as well, including a book called, the *Malleus Maleficarum*. which argued that witches live among us and have to be burned at the stake. Talk about fake news.

The *Malleus Maleficarum (Hammer of Wickedness)* was a best seller in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is an example of something going viral that was responsible for the killing of thousands of innocents. The Reformation launched violence on a scale the world had not seen before, incited by hate speech from every quarter, high and low.

Ferguson believes we are now living through a secular reformation; one of political ideology. And who knows what kind of violence may erupt in the coming months or years because some ideologues are willing to kill or die for their own version of capital T Truth. The violent idiocy of January 6th may have been just the beginning. And that is terrifying.

Now, while the gospel of John speaks of Jesus as an embodiment of capital T Truth, it also offers us a *skeptical* point of view on the matter. That view came from the cynic who turned Jesus over for execution --- Pontius Pilate.

Allow me to read a small section of Jesus' interrogation over the question of whether Jesus was “king of the Jews” ...

“My kingdom,” says Jesus, “doesn't consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn't be handed over But I'm not that kind of king, not the world's kind of king.”

Then Pontius Pilate says, “So, are you a king or not?”

And Jesus answers, "You tell me ... I was born and entered the world so that I could witness to the truth. Everyone who cares for truth, who has any feeling for it, recognizes my voice."

And Pilate says, "What is truth?"

What a good question. Pilate is often shamed by preachers for saying such a thing.

Yes, he could be mocking Jesus here, or ... he might, in fact, be asking a very honest question. We don't know. I mean, what indeed IS truth?

Frankly, I think we need more skeptics like Pilate at this time when so many people lack the ability to think critically ... *and don't even know why that might be important.*

I mean, look, Pilate is focused on trying to determine whether this man Jesus is a threat to Rome. He may be cynical about truth, but I also think he is genuinely curious about this man.

Jesus had a lot of followers. Pilate, on the other hand, was not, in any way, popular with anyone, and he knew it.

He knows he is in danger of being relieved of his position if he doesn't up his game. So, he's interested in this popular teacher from Galilee. "What makes Jesus tick?" he wonders.

In the end, Pilate decides that truth is for people who have the leisure to worry about such things. "I'm running a province of Imperial Rome here," he seems to be saying, "not a school of philosophy"

For such a man, "truth" is more muscular: it's whatever you can get away with; whatever enhances one's situation with those powers *immediately* above you.

His motto would be: "Expedience above truth."

In contrast Jesus says, "Everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice."

Now, notice he does *not* say, "Everyone who *knows* the truth hears my voice." It's everyone who *belongs* to the truth."

For Jesus, truth isn't a collection of facts to be learned in school.

No, it's an attitude of living. It's even bigger than that; it's something to be possessed by, belong to, or to be in relationship with. As Jesus says, People who are of the truth hear truth and they also "respond to it."

He's acting as if truth is a live thing; as if it has mass. Healthy people are attracted to it, he's saying.

This is very like something else he says in John's gospel: "I am the good shepherd ... My sheep recognize my voice." That is to say that those who belong to the truth recognize it by instinct, like sheep who recognize the shepherd by the tambour of her voice.

In his *Letter to the Romans*, chapter 1, the apostle Paul speaks of truth this way. He says, people try to "put a shroud over it. But the basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is!

By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes, as such, can't see: eternal power ... and the mystery of [God's] divine being. (Romans 1 – The Message).

What Paul is saying here is that all the important truths of life and living refuse to be forgotten. That resonates with me 100%.

Think of it – all the important truths of life and living refuse to be forgotten.

In her book, *A Chorus of Stones* Susan Griffin tells an interesting bit of family history.

When my father was a small boy, his mother did something [our family deemed] unforgivable. It was a source of shame as many secrets are, and hence kept hidden from my father and, eventually from me. My great-aunt would have told me this secret before she died, but by that time she could not remember it. I have always sensed that my grandmother's transgression was sexual. Whatever she did was taken as cause by my grandfather and his mother to abandon her.

They left Canada and moved to California, taking her two sons, my father and his brother, with them.

My father was not allowed to cry over his lost mother, nor to speak her name. He could not give in to grief but instead was taught to practice the military virtue of forbearance and to set an example in his manhood for his younger brother, Roland. In this way I suppose my great-grandmother hoped to erase the memory of my grandmother from all of our minds. But her loss has haunted us. How old is the habit of denial. We keep secrets from ourselves that all along we know.

Susan Griffin says poignantly, "I who am a woman, have my father's face. And he, I suspect, had his mother's face. There is a characteristic way my father's eyelids fold, and you can see this in my face and in a photograph I have of him as a little boy. In the same photograph there is a silent sorrow mapped on his face, and this sorrow is mine too."

It says in the Bible that "the sins of the Fathers are visited on the children." This is not an example of Biblical vindictiveness. It's merely a statement of fact. Truth will not be suppressed forever.

We have an opportunity to learn this every Thanksgiving day or Christmas when we sit down with our extended families, right? That's when all this "old family business" percolates up. There's something in the air; history between family members that you can feel, even if you don't understand it. Once in a while, a new generation exposes old lies and truth comes out of hiding.

For example, my grandfather, turns out, did not die of lead poisoning as I had been told growing up. No, he brought home a sexually transmitted disease from his time working in the mining camps of South Africa, but no one would talk about for a generation. And it has had an incredible effect on my father's family. None of us grandchildren knows the full extent of it.

Now, to be truthful, we should never be glib about revealing these secrets. Too often they are used as weapons to punish our loved ones. Emily Dickinson once said, "The truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind."

"What is truth? It is not a bit static. It is a very dynamic reality. It is something in us that is worked out from within us (every one of us) every moment of our lives.

The late Stephen Covey once told a very revealing story about such a thing:

A few years ago when I was giving a seminar on the Oregon coast, a man came up to me and said, "You know Stephen, I really don't enjoy coming to these seminars." He had my attention.

"Look at everyone else here," he continued. "Look at this beautiful coast line and the sea out there and all that's happening. And all I can do is sit and worry about the grilling I'm going to get from my wife tonight on the phone.

"She gives me the third-degree every time I'm away. Where did I eat breakfast? Who else was there? Was I in meetings all morning? When did we stop for lunch? What did I do during lunch? How did I spend the afternoon? What did I do for entertainment in the evening? Who was with me? What did we talk about?

"And what she really wants to know, but never quite asks is, who can she call to verify everything I tell her. She just nags me and questions everything I do whenever I'm away. It's taken the bloom out of this whole experience. I really don't enjoy it at all?"

He looked pretty miserable. We talked for a while, and then he made a very interesting comment. "I guess she knows all the questions to ask," he said, a little sheepishly. "It was at a seminar like this one that I met her . . . when I was married to someone else!"

As I said earlier, Pilate seems taken with this mysterious Galilean but he becomes fed up with pressures that come from all sides and so he pronounces the death penalty upon Jesus

and then in the most pitiful public gesture in recorded history -- he washes his hands of the whole affair. As if a little water could make our decisions and our responsibilities go away.

You know, the Greek word for Truth is *aleithea*." At the core of that word is, *Lethe* -- the name of the mythical river of forgetfulness. So the word truth literally means, "not forgetting."

Let us acknowledge that there is within all of us something that is moved to forget some of the central truths we come in contact with in our lives. But we forget or deny them at our peril and the peril of those we live with.

You know, doctors speak of *the doorknob moment*. Like the woman I heard about who, when her doctor was leaving the exam room and had his hand on the knob she spoke up and said, "I wonder if the problems I'm having have anything to do with the fact that my boyfriend keeps shooting me with his dart gun?"

Facts matter. The facts of this world and the facts of our lives, though some act as if they don't matter; that people can just lie because it's just one person's word against another's.

But truth does have mass. And it does refuse to stay hidden.

Richard Nixon said, "I am not a crook" and we found out that, indeed, he was. Bill Clinton said, "I did not have sex with that woman," and look -- he did.

Fact checkers tell us our last president lied 30,000 plus times in his 4 year term. The public's apathy and despair towards Trump's lies, researchers point out, were *by design*: The attacks mirrored a Russian propaganda technique known as the "firehose of falsehood," which is exactly what it sounds like—relentless, rapid, bogus information meant to weary the listener into passivity and the critic into apathy and despair. But the eye of history is relentless and refuses to weary.

As Mohandas K. Gandhi told us ..

"When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it--always."

Amen