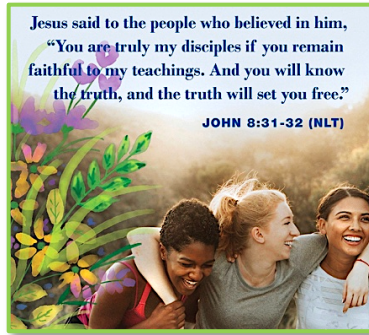


How Do You Know What's True?

September 10, 2023

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John 8:28-32

Jesus once again addressed them. “I am the world’s Light. No one who follows me stumbles around in the darkness. I provide plenty of light to live in.” The Pharisees objected, “All we have is your word on this. We need more than this to go on.” Jesus replied, “You’re right that you only have my word. But you can depend on it being true. I know where I’ve come from and where I go next. You don’t know where I’m from or where I’m headed. You decide according to what you can see and touch. I don’t make judgments like that. And if I did, my judgement would be true because I wouldn’t make it out of the narrowness of my experience but in the largeness of the One who sent me. That fulfills the conditions set down in God’s Law. They still didn’t get it, so Jesus tried again. ... “I’m not making this up, but speaking only what God taught me. The One who sent me stays with me. I am not abandoned. God sees how much joy I take in pleasing God.” Jesus then turned to the Jews who had claimed to believe in him. “If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you.”

Tell the Truth

Emily Dickinson

Tell all the truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too Bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
As lightning to the children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or everyone be blind.

I am pretty sure that following the news, filled daily with conflicting claims to the truth (and with obvious lies), reports of global uprisings and growing divisions among and within nations, acts of racial and sexual violence, chronicling in so many ways the intense alienation going on even within our own families – ALL this disturbs us and raises our emotions, fears and questions – questions such as *What is truth, and how do we know it's true?*

Some truths are clear, e.g., gravity exists, the sun rises every morning, air is an absolute necessity for our existence. Science has helped us see by means of facts, experience, and consequences of choices and behaviors things that we now accept as truths, e.g., COVID was a global reality that caused thousands of deaths, and that vaccinations have reduced the number of deaths attributed to it. Also, science has shown us that polio can be prevented. But truth also is sometimes obscure, changes, evolves. In forty-four years of ministry, I have not preached on truth as a sermon topic, but today it seems timely to review the question of truth, as it is linked to our faith understandings, and perhaps to set a context for continuing conversations among us.

Let's start with the first Reading from John. Through Eugene Peterson's interpretation of this ancient text, we find Jesus defending himself to both his enemies as well as his closest colleagues, the disciples. Hear again how this interaction proceeded.

Jesus says, "I am the world's Light. No one who follows me stumbles around in the darkness. I provide you plenty of light to live in." And the Pharisees objected, "All we have is your word on this. Who is this God? We need more than this to go on." Jesus replied, "You're right that you only have my word. But you can depend on it being true. I know where I've come from and where I go next. You don't know where I'm from or where I'm headed. You decide according to *what you can see and touch!* I don't make judgments like that. And if I did, my judgement would be true because I wouldn't make it out of the narrowness of my experience, but in the largeness of the One who sent me. That fulfills the conditions set down in God's law." It's clear they didn't get it. So Jesus tried again. He said, "I'm not making this up, but speaking only what God taught me. The One who sent me stays with me. I am not abandoned. God sees how much joy I take in pleasing God." Jesus then turned to the disciples and said, "If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you."

What I get from this text is that *you have to be able to believe in something to see it as a truth*. If we believe there is a God, Higher Power, Holy Spirit, Creator, Ultimate Guide, who wants this planet and humans to exist, we believe each generation is here to help it become a better world. We are continually learning truths. By living the truths of love, compassion, caring for others, being hospitable to all, we might also experience those truths in ways that we *can* see, perhaps touch, and feel in our own lives. We believe we have been called through the example of Jesus, and many others since, to believe this is true.

Truth often gets murky is in how it is interpreted and for what reasons. It's clear that religious groups again are taking sides, proclaiming their faith beliefs to be "the truth." The reasons they are doing this are quite clear: they are seeking power and control over others. Could seeing this happening help us arrive at a new understanding of truth as *something that does not hurt, harm or control someone else?*

I want to switch for a moment to Emily Dickinson's poem, "Tell the Truth," first reminding you that Emily lived in a time when the nation was becoming more divided, when people were becoming more alienated from one another around the questions of slavery and abolition prior to the Civil War. Maybe you had trouble understanding her poem as I did. But to link these two readings, I think her first lines "Tell all the truth but tell it slant – /Success in Circuit lies," directly relate to the passages in John. Jesus tried to explain a truth to those who followed him, as they tried to understand what he was about. He spoke of a belief system in which there is a God, and in which we are connected to that God, and within which we each have been called to be about the work of keeping each other and our planet alive and

nurtured. Jesus tried to present that truth, but the disciples didn't get it, so he tried again and again to tell and teach about it in ways that they might understand. He was telling it "slant" –in another way, in a circuit (looping it) over and over. Another quick example of telling the truth "slant" was in the IJ yesterday morning, with the bylines, "Scientist says he left out the full truth in study on climate change, wildfires." Reading the article you discover the scientist knew a larger truth he was sure would not get beyond the known bias of the educators and reviewers, but he needed to get his article published, so he only told part of the truth. He told the truth, but he told it slanted.

I made another connection to Emily's lines: "As lightning to the children eased/ With explanations kind/ The truth must dazzle gradually." I was reminded that in one of the Saturday sessions we had before Easter last year, several of us remembered a way "a religious truth" was simply and easily conveyed to those of us as children attending local churches. We learned the song "Jesus Loves Me," the words of which are:

Jesus loves me! This I know,
For the Bible tells me so;
Little ones to Him belong;
They are weak, but He is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me!
The Bible tells me so.

As small children, we didn't know what a metaphor was. We didn't know the various meanings of the stories in the Bible, or why it was important someone we didn't know, Jesus, loved us. But perhaps as we became adults we found some dazzling truths as we experienced miracles of our own or of others, and understood more fully the nature of love as taught to us through the actions of Jesus.

For the next few moments Lisa Bogart and I are going to begin a conversation about some of our understandings about truth and how we go about knowing it – not in any way as wise sages, but rather to invite you all to think about truth, and how you got to believing it.

Lisa was invited by her son to read a lengthy book he found intriguing so the two of them might have some conversations about it. The book is *These Truths* by Jill Lepore. [Ann and Lisa proceeded to have a conversation about the book and some of what Lisa learned from reading it.]

I leave you with these questions to ponder: *What's a fundamental truth for you, a truth that has guided you, and how did you come to know it?* Here is a timely blessing Ann read at the close of the service:

As the seasons change,
We turn to you, God of creation,
Our source, our wisdom, our comfort.

Be our anchor in the midst of turmoil.
Our healing spirit in times of brokenness.
Our blessing in the emptiness.
We are yours. Amen.

