

## ***Keeping In Mind: On Truth: John 18:33-38, 14:1-7***

### ***Preface:***

Well People of God, last week's message was a doozy. I briefly reminded us of what we'd talked about with regard to our congregational Purpose Statement and our Core Values...and then announced that part of why this was so important for us to keep in mind is because after the turn of the year I wouldn't be around to remind us of it. I'm resigning.

And I spent a lot of time talking about what I felt God would want us to keep in mind in light of that news. And what I'd like to do between now and Advent is spend some time talking about a wide range of different things: principles, specific biblical passages, attitudes of faith. It's a pile of things that I simply believe are important.

Today we're talking about truth. Truth. Let's pray, then get into it.

### ***Prayer:***

#### ***The Church & Truth:***

The Church, for as long as it's been around, has claimed to have access to the fundamental truth about the world. It's followed Israel in this, who, as Yahweh's People, were given unique truths about what the world was for, what people

were for, who and how God was.

### ***The Truth: Symbolic Power***

To talk about “the Truth” though it to talk less about, oh, some pile of fundamental, objective facts and about more subtle things. Because “the Truth,” with a capital-T, is a word that has become symbolic of a lot more than just facts. People defend “the Truth,” protect “the Truth,” fight for “the Truth.” People live or die for the “Truth,” kill, marry, bear children or beat them for it.

So we have the truth, lower-case-T, which people might promise to tell, which some people think matters still in our world, and we have capital-T “Truth,” which, by and large, people fight for, over, around, and underneath. Because capital-T truth is symbolic for people, a word that is a stand-in for basic, fundamental reality.

### ***Jesus & the Truth:***

There’s no moral failure in using “Truth” this way. It’s reasonable. Jesus himself, in the passage today, uses it that way. He’s talking about his death, and where he’ll go after his Resurrection, although his disciples don’t realize that. He says, “You know the way to the place where I am going.” Doubting Thomas, who was the first one willing to die for Jesus--so history hasn’t given him the fairest name--asks, “Umm. We don’t know where you’re going, so how can we know the way?” Basically: We don’t know what you’re

talking about. And Jesus responds, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus didn’t say this so that his followers could put it on bumper stickers and get tattoos and fridge magnets with the phrase.

He’s using it to say that he himself is the means, the avenue or conduit, by which access to the most fundamental aspects of reality is given. If capital-T truth is shorthand for everything a person can believe, “life and love and why,” then Jesus claims that “life and love and why” only make sense if we look at them through him.

### ***Discovering Truth Through Personal Relationships:***

And there are things to notice, most importantly the fact that truth, as far as Jesus expresses it, is fundamentally relational. It has to do with a person, and being in relationship with that person. That person, Jesus says, is himself. To know Jesus is to know God.

To “know something,” of course, is to have a grip on what’s real about a thing. This is why the Bible often uses “knowing” as a euphemism for sex, which is a deeply intimate, knowledge-giving relational act. To “know truth” is to know Jesus, have a grip on reality based on how Jesus has described reality. He ends his statement to Thomas by saying, “If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

Jesus is the means by which Truth is grasped: To be in relationship with him is a prerequisite if a person is ever going to really understand the basic functioning of the world.

And while I care about this--really care about this--it's not something that connects with much of my daily life or the ways I most often serve God, except in one fundamental way. If Capital-T Truth has to do with people being in relationship--God and person, being in relationship--then lower-case-t truth has to do with relationships, too.

### ***True? Real? Fact?: Subjectively, Individually defined***

We're in a time where what is true, or real, or fact, is defined not objectively, not by a broad, diverse collection of voices. What's true, or real, or fact is defined subjectively, with regard to a particular individual's emotional state or experiences. What is true, or fact, or real is under debate. Because who wants to say any person's individual perspective is more or less valid than their own? And no one is saying their own is less valid than someone else's.

### ***True? Real? Fact?: Giving Up***

In some ways this is wonderful, because it acknowledges that every single person lives with enormous implicit, unexamined biases, prejudices, and blindness to things. The way we see the world, categorize it and make sense of it is driven by the language we speak and the culture that we're

most shaped by. But in other ways it is a terrible danger, and virulent. Because one response to realizing the biases and blindnesses that come with being who we are where we are is to throw up our hands, and say, “Who can get a firm grip on what’s true, anyway? Why bother?”

### ***True? Real? Fact?: Who Cares!***

In some ways the greatest problem of our time isn’t, oh, whatever you complained about with somebody last night. The greatest problem of our time is that we no longer care about finding out what the greatest problem of our time is. What I mean is that, basically, we’ve given up trying to find common ground with others.

### ***True? Real? Fact?: Self-interested Survival***

And when I say common ground, I mean it in its most basic, earthly way. We’ve given up trying to figure out how to be grounded in reality together. What most of us do is try to make some functional sense of the world, figure out a framework for the way the world works that makes enough sense for us to survive, and that’s it. Our little ideology functions, and it’s fine. We just don’t care, don’t have the energy, the compelling reason, or the drive to figure out what’s real in the world and what’s a lie. So we gather with others who share a similar view of the world as us, and then stop asking “What’s real? What’s true? What’s false?”

### ***True? Real? Fact?: Real Problem***

The problem--our real problem--is that the world as it really is will always crush our mental construct of the world, our made-up story of the world. We can call COVID a hoax all day every day until it kills us, right? The real world has a habit of destroying the safety of the deceptions we embrace. Real life destroys the lies we've embraced.

All we really have to do to remember this is a look in a mirror and realize "Wait. That's really what I look like?" Hear our voices recorded, and say, "Wait. That's what I really sound like?" Real, objective life forces its way into our lives. It sometimes takes time, but it always happens. Usually, unfortunately, we don't embrace it until it hurts us or someone we love.

All this to say that what's true, or real, or fact, is, right now, debated. It's ignored. In fact, right now, every claim in our society about what's true, or real, or fact is automatically under suspicion. There's nothing new about this. In Jesus' brilliantly rhetorical exchange with Pilate, Jesus says, putting words in Pilate's mouth: "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." Pilate responds by saying, "What is truth?"

And this gets taken in all sorts of ways: Is he exhausted, worn out by his own murderous politicking? Is he asking sincerely, but doesn't have time for an answer? Is he

prideful, sure of the way manipulation and propaganda serve to make any words that come out of his ruling house useful to whatever ends he wants them to be?

For John's first readers, and us, we're meant to go back to this claim Jesus makes that a relationship with him is the only means by which any fundamental truth about the world can be known. But this scene points out to us that capital-T truth, as a symbol for everything important in human life, has always been considered by certain people something that can be used, messed with, played with, and debated. There's nothing new about our current situation.

### ***Christian Implications:***

But there are implications for Christians in a society in which what's normal is to be suspicious of anything claiming to be true, real, or factual. We're the ones, after all, who say that reality is most thoroughly, most correctly, understood by way of Jesus. That to know Jesus is to best understand the true things about reality. Making that claim has littler, smaller claims that follow from it. Let's mention them.

### ***Implications: Truth-seeking***

First of all, words mean things, right? I mean words mean things. They matter. I can't boonda-wonky dun flamp zimbo? Zeeb-zeeb? I can't stand up here and speak made-up gibberish and, when I'm done, say, "I hope you take to heart the things I just said." Words depend on shared

language.

Particular words mean particular things. And one implication for Christians is that we're careful with the words we use, because words mean things. If we don't understand what someone is saying, we try to have people clarify. If we don't understand Scripture, we try to figure out what someone is trying to say in it. We seek out the true meaning of the words people are using, and are careful ourselves with the words we use.

### ***Truth-Seeking: Check-in***

Are you careful or careless with your words? Do we believe that words have meaning outside of what we wish they meant. And so to speak is to do something powerful: every time we speak we're helping make the world more meaningful.

### ***Implications: Truth-Telling***

Christians, who are told to "speak the truth in love," do it. To speak the truth in love is to be as honest as we can about something, as clear and precise as we can be. Christians don't lie.

And avoid the whole, "Would you lie to a person who is going to blow up the world if you tell the truth?" nonsense, and the whole "What makes up a white lie?" distraction. We're always supposed to act like Jesus; Jesus, was practical



about love if he was anything, and figured out ways to reject evil and still tell the truth. Questions like this are for people who care most about what's the least they have to do, rather than the most they have to do for the Lord.

But If we care about the truth, we can't excuse lies and we can't say things that are not true. And people lie for all sorts of reasons, right?

### ***Truth-Telling: Why Lie?***

We lie to persuade. We want to get into something or out of something. We want to get people to do things, give things, say things, and lying gets us there.

We lie to avoid shame. Maybe we feel guilty, maybe we're embarrassed. We don't have the moral courage to face our own sinfulness, or the bravery to condemn others' judgments, so we lie--to ourselves, to others, even to God, who usually doesn't call us on it--so we lie. We embellish the truth, stretch it so that we seem better than we are, by whoever's standards we're reckoning it.

And right on the heels of this are our lies to avoid punishment or retribution. It's a thing we all understand because it's a thing we all have done. We don't want to embrace the personal costs. Well, I've never done it. I'm lying!

And we lie to protect our power. This is especially true of institutions and those who lead them. The move to institutional transparency--that is, making it so that everyone can see why we make the decisions we make, what those are, and how we carry them out--is one of the great moves our society has recently made. Be suspicious of any move away from institutional transparency.

And I think when Pilate says, "What is truth?" what he's nodding toward is this category of lie: His power is so great that truth is irrelevant, facts are irrelevant, and reality is irrelevant. He doesn't have to care about the truth, doesn't have to answer for his decisions. He wants Jesus to recognize that as far as it goes, truth is what Pilate decides it is. But it's not. His power has turned him into a living lie, who creates a sort of bubble of reality around him. When he caves, and has Jesus killed just because, we see how bankrupt this habit of lying becomes: When you're no longer grounded in reality, but believe you can control it, you become shockingly persuadable yourself.

Lying to protect our power is most often done by the objectively powerful, and while those with little power lie to protect it, too, they are simply more often forced to face reality than those with great power are.

Lying to protect our power, to avoid shame or punishment, to persuade are never excusable. We can't bluster, boast,

deceive, or shame. We can't scapegoat. We can't be unkind. We can't side with those who do. Words matter, we Christians tell the truth. If we can't speak the truth, let's not speak. When Paul says, "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth," he's pointing out that lies and their cousins--deception, boasting, shaming--these are evil things.

### ***Truth-Telling: Check in?***

So. Are we liars? Or easier to answer: Have we been lying to persuade? To avoid shame or punishment? To protect our power?

And do you excuse lies? Because if we excuse lies--it's just personality, it's just the way they are, it's just that emotion got the better of them, or me--if we excuse lies, we are not acting in line with love. When we excuse lies, we sin, and morally, in the same boat as the liar.

So are you lying? Are you excusing lies?

### ***Implications: Discovering Truth, Reality, and Fact in Relationships:***

Love and friendship both thrive when a person finds another person interesting. If you find a person uninteresting, it is really, really difficult to care about them.

And we can cultivate an attitudes of being interested in

people if we want. Some people don't want to, which I think is a little faithless, but ultimately, to like someone is to find them interesting in some way.

And that interest, in part, comes because the other person isn't just like us. They may be like us in all sorts of ways, from sense of humor to, gosh, height. But they're unlike us in ways, too. Being interested in those differences is critical for love and friendship.

Having those differences present is critical in the discovery of truth. We cannot discover what's fact, real, or true by ourselves. And we can't discover what's fact, real, or true with people who are exactly like us, either. It's what's different between me and you that makes having a relationship interesting; and it's our differences that act as that mirror to us, to help real, objective life force its way into our lives.

Just like words mean things because language is social, we have to have common ground with others in order to discover truth. But if our context, our assumptions, our experiences, and our commitments are too similar, I don't think we can actually get a handle on what's true, fact or real.

This means that we Christians, who are supposed to be most committed to the truth, tell the fewest lies, act in love,

we have to open ourselves up to relationships with people who are both like us and unlike us if we're every going to be able to know what's true. Just getting outside our own subjective heads is better than nothing, and basic if words are going to mean anything at all, much less true...but it's not much better than nothing. It's what we teach little kids, and part of what creates in us mature Christ-likeness is speaking the truth in love to each other.

If Capital-T Truth has to do with people being in relationship--God and person, being in relationship--then lower-case-t truth has to do with relationships, too.

If we only spend time listening to people who already agree with us, we will not ever know what's true. If we only spend time with people who are just like us, we won't know what's real.

***Implications: Check-in:***

Who do you debate reality with? Who do you make sense of life with? Do you have people who you dialogue about things with who are different from you? Racially? Socioeconomically? Geographically? Ethnically? Linguistically? What news stations, news channels do we listen to? What websites, magazines, or newspapers do we read? If it's only one of these, all the time, then I think we're kidding ourselves about how well we understand what's true when it comes to any given situation we're trying to

understand.

If we don't have people who are as different from us as they are like us to talk about the things we hear, then I don't know if we can ever discover what's true, real, or fact.

### ***Self-Awareness:***

Lastly, let me just say this. Students today learn how to be savvy consumers of information, how to distinguish between lies and truth, propaganda and fact. They're learning about how to weigh the influence of, say, a peer-reviewed journal article versus an Insta story.

For people who care about the truth we should be at least as thoughtful as 3rd graders. We can't teach the next generation how to discern lies from truth if we don't know how to do this ourselves. We need to learn how to ask critical questions of ourselves. Am I good at telling the difference between an opinion and a fact? Am I honest about the ways I try to confirm my biases? Is the person I'm listening to trustworthy or not? If someone isn't trustworthy, don't believe them.

### ***Conclusion:***

We can't care about what's true, real, or factual if we aren't humble. Because it takes humility to not only answer the questions I've asked us, but also to admit we're failing in truth-seeking or truth-telling or truth-protecting.

Can you tell the difference between a fact and an opinion? Do you see the ways you try to have your prejudices and biases confirmed by what you listen to or watch?

Do we have people who both very different from us, and very similar to us, who we can talk about reality with? Or are we in echo-chambers, where the only people we hear from are people saying what we want to hear?

Why have we been lying? To persuade people? To avoid shame or punishment? To protect our power? Who are we lying to? Ourselves? Others? God?

Are we careful or careless with our words? Do we try to redefine things for all the reasons we also lie or does real meaning matter?

Why do we excuse or justify lies other people speak, rather than call them to tell the truth? This is important, so important: We must call the lies we tell to persuade others, avoid trouble, and protect ourselves lies. They are not exaggerations, they are not embellishments. They are lies, and have nothing to do with the truth, but are, as far as Scripture puts it, in bed with evil. And to not call them out is to maybe lie down with the liars. To promote lies is to be a liar.

Yet we who stand with Jesus have access to the most true things about what it means to be a person, embodied in the one who has engaged us and others with deep intimacy. And Jesus, who is will help us stop disregarding the truth if we want his help, or believe we might need it.