

October 24, 2021

What is Truth?

John 18:37-38

Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?' After he had said this, he went out to the crowd again and told them, 'I find no case against him.'

Proverbs 3:13-31

Happy are those who find wisdom,
and those who get understanding,
for her income is better than silver,
and her revenue better than gold.
She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honour.
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called happy.

The LORD by wisdom founded the earth;
by understanding he established the heavens;
by his knowledge the deeps broke open,
and the clouds drop down the dew.

My child, do not let these escape from your sight:
keep sound wisdom and prudence,
and they will be life for your soul
and adornment for your neck.
Then you will walk on your way securely
and your foot will not stumble.

If you sit down, you will not be afraid;
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.
Do not be afraid of sudden panic,
or of the storm that strikes the wicked;
for the LORD will be your confidence
and will keep your foot from being caught.

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
when it is in your power to do it.
Do not say to your neighbour, 'Go, and come again;
tomorrow I will give it'—when you have it with you.
Do not plan harm against your neighbour
who lives trustingly beside you.
Do not quarrel with anyone without cause,
when no harm has been done to you.
Do not envy the violent
and do not choose any of their ways;

We are still in the midst of our “just living in a pandemic world” series. I quote Peter Marty of the magazine *The Christian Century*. “[T]here is some outsized work ahead for pastoring in an age of conspiracy and disinformation. We’re seeing “a kind of moral freak show unfolding,” says Peter Wehner, as lies penetrate our national psyche and a common sense of reality fades beneath the blurring of fact with fiction. But at least we know what we’re up against. Churches can be committed to speaking the truth, displaying constancy, addressing paranoia, denouncing cults, and elevating the gospel above every nefarious claim that demonizes others or sows chaos”.¹

Peter Marty suggests that we speak the truth and elevate the gospel. This invites us to consider the truth as we understand it and the gospel we claim. This is, actually, a good exercise for everyone and not just the preacher of the morning. Jesus Christ is for me the truth. The gospel, the Good News, to which I hold is that God loves the world as well as me in such a profound way that I am invited to own that love; reflecting it back to God, to my neighbour, to creatures, and to the land. Love of God, self and neighbour based on the pattern of Jesus Christ—this is my canon, my measuring rod, of all other truth claims. Now that I have clarified my baseline, let us explore the tensions which come with it.

Truth and Relationships

While it was still balmy out, I had a walk and talk with one who is an anti vaxxer. I almost hesitate sharing such a thing for the condemnation which might rain down on me, but life places us in precarious places and sometimes we go there. This fellow, and all those who choose to be un-vaccinated, still need pastors and people who think differently than them as a part of their lives. In my presence I hoped to communicate a bit of the incarnation which God offered to us in Jesus Christ. I was not there to debate, argue, or convince. I did not take the bait he laid for me and I did not provoke him. I sincerely tried to listen and understand. I was present to remind myself and him that beyond all our theories about the truth we are a community. Unless community or relationships are toxic, I also think part of the truth of Jesus is that we find ways to abide together. I will return to this visit periodically through the course of the sermon.

I have visited with congregational members about divisions within their families and communities, particularly around vaccination. How have they responded, I ask. Some have chosen to avoid contentious issues in light of scathing judgmental and disrespectful attitudes from others. In some cases, family

¹ Peter Marty, “Six Predictions for the post-pandemic church” in *The Christian Century* (March 10, 2021), p. 1.

members have not been visited or hosted on account of their vaccination history. Conversation, yes; hosting no. Almost all strive to remain in relationship and yet recognize that there are boundaries with those who view truth differently. I want to speak to this multiplicity of truth.

Truth and Relativism

The rise of the term "post-factual" does not infer that people are lying more often today than in the past, or that they have begun to make claims about things of which they have little or no actual knowledge. That has always been the case. Rather, "*post-factual*" refers to a tendency to accept what we would like to believe as factual – even when all the evidence is against us – or to deny the validity of available evidence because what we don't want to be true must also be factually false. This fallacy of desired and perceived truth is...encountered in politics and media and among public interests [worldwide]...

This development poses an enormous challenge for science, which has guided truth claims in the last decades. The institution that is all about facts is struggling to find an adequate response. In a post-factual age, science has adopted a pro-factual stance, but this has only further undermined its authority among those convinced of alternative theories. The crux of this problem lies in the difficulty that science faces in determining what is actually factual. One can find a study or report or expert opinion to prove most anything these days, and most all conversation partners look askance at the sources of information which do not support what we would like to be as factual. Thus, science and knowledge has been side-lined in the public debate about truth.

In our post-factual world there is a widespread belief that truth claims merely reflect what we consider to be desirable or plausible. In other words, that what is right and what is wrong are simply a matter of 'gut feeling'. It is a world-view without a (neutral) arbiter of truth that could tell us which claims are legitimate and which are not. In this climate of post-factual relativism...statements that confirm a particular mindset are considered true in their own way – anything else is a lie.

[T]he space for civil discourse necessary [in] the search for a common good which transcends individual interests ha[s] fallen by the wayside. What remains is the individual's unconditional commitment to their own convictions. In the absence of a shared understanding of truth and decency, we look to our convictions to guide our actions".² In this climate, what does discipleship to Jesus Christ look like?

² Charlie Warzel: <https://www.iass-potsdam.de/en/blog/2021/01/democracy-humiliated-creeping-erosion-truth-and-civility>

Are we creating opportunities to learn more about the concerns and fears of those who think differently than we do? Are we encouraging leaders committed to serving and protecting the common good rather than political interests, stockholder interests, ideological interests? Are we making the link between public policy and those who fall on the margins of society knowing that the poor and disenfranchised always suffer more extremely in pandemics and economic hardship³?

The Shaping of Truth

Back to my ambling and rambling conversation that fateful early fall day.... My walking partner that day invoked the term “ivermectin” a number of times as a viable alternative to vaccination. From what I understand ivermectin was crafted as a concoction to get rid of intestinal parasites in animals. It brought to mind an article which I read in the *StarPhoenix*. In this brief report an associate dean of academic science at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine was quoted. “Right there on the label, it says ‘for animal use only. Do not use in humans’... the risk of a human overdosing on a medication meant for a 500kg animal is extremely high”.⁴ So we have an academic dean within a well reputed college of Veterinary medicine, a well-meaning pastor, and a conversation partner with strong opinions citing various sources. What is truth??? There has been a shift in the way truth is shaped for each of us. It is important to consider this trend.

“A lot of Canadians are struggling to understand COVID-19 denialism and anti-vaccination attitudes among their loved ones,” says lead author Aengus Bridgman, a PhD Candidate in Political Science at McGill University... According to the study, published in *Frontiers in Political Science*, these attitudes are partially the result of massive Canadian consumption of information from the United States.

The researchers analyzed the behaviours of the 200,000 most active Canadian Twitter users and conducted surveys on news consumption habits and COVID-19 beliefs of Canadians. They found that those who use social media are relatively more exposed to US-based information than domestic sources of information, and that exposure to US news outlets was associated with misperceptions about COVID-19...

According to the researchers, this influence produces a troubling vulnerability for Canada during the pandemic. “It’s hard for Canadian journalists, scientists and public health experts to be heard by the average Canadian, given all the noise generated by American sources,” says Bridgman.”⁵

³ Nicholas A. Christakis, *Apollo’s Arrow: The Profound and Enduring Impact of Coronavirus on the Way we Live* (New York: Little Brown Spark, 2020): pp. 178-179.

⁴ Nick Pearce, “Vet prof stunned people using animal dewormer” in *The StarPhoenix* (Wed, Sept 1, 2021).

⁵ <https://www.mcgill.ca/newsroom/channels/news/americans-are-super-spreaders-covid-19-misinformation-330229>;
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>

The upshot is that people are drinking from many sources which impact their understanding of the truth. Who we trust for information shapes our sense of truth. I pay close attention to what medical health officers, specialists in viral health, the Center for Disease Control and journalists from *The Christian Science Monitor*, PBS, *Sojourners*, and, yes CBC. These shape my biases and my sense of what is true about certain topics. Why do I trust them? Consistently they visit with people who have a range of concerns, fears, and feelings to help us all better understand people and issues; they are critical of political interests, stockholder interests, and ideological interests which adversely impact civility and decency. They make links between the marginalized of society and public policy.

Truth, Jesus and the Common Good

My conversation partner that afternoon was deeply concerned about the prospects of being persecuted for his choices. He wanted to hear my thoughts what the church or Christians could be doing. I consistently maintained that Jesus and the early church and that most of our Mennonite ancestors never encouraged or supported armed resistance or violent insurrection. They were always willing to die for others, but never willing to kill them. At this point I tried to clarify my reasons for becoming vaccinated.

I explained that I try to drive the speed limit when going through a school zone or on the highway or in my neighborhood. They have determined, I said, that these speed limits protect people and the common good—it is public policy which leads to fewer people dying or being injured. I also wear a seat belt, for similar reasons. I make efforts to dispose of my vehicle oil and paints in a responsible manner because dumping them down the drain doesn't serve the community well. For me, I said, getting vaccinated for COVID-19 is similar to these examples—it is part of my care for my neighbours and my community. I try to ground my choices in a life which reflect love of God, community and creation—nothing less than the Great Command, in fact. I try to follow what Jesus said and did. Interestingly, he feels much the same way as he described his concerns with what might be in the vaccine and his perceptions of profit mongering by the pharmaceutical companies.

My hope is that we are able to remain in respectful conversation as time passes. With colder weather coming I doubt we will visit in the next months, and that is fine too. Maybe the winter will bring more clarity for us all. Maybe in subsequent years I will learn a few things from him. Maybe through conversation and presence I will convey something of the truth I claim; a truth which is rooted in God's compassion and Christ's invitation for us to be compassionate people. Maybe. Maybe it be so. Amen.

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