

8 January 2017

**The Truth Is . . . God Said It!**  
Matthew 5:17-18; 2 Peter 3:14-18

Our reading today is one of the few things that Jesus actually said about scripture – by which he meant the Hebrew Bible, the “Law and the Prophets.” We read from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, verses 17-18.

*17 ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.*

Jesus expressed great confidence in the words of the Old Testament. As the New Testament was being written, though – primarily the Gospels and the Letters of Paul – Peter expresses both confidence *and* caution. We read 2 Peter 3, verses 14-18:

*14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15 and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him, 16 speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. 17 You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*

For the next few weeks, we’re going to be talking about Truth. Here’s where we seem to be today as regards the concept of Truth: lost. Truth feels like a desperately old-fashioned idea, almost obsolete. People used to use it to refer to some objective reality that could be used to measure the validity of statements or opinions: scientific evidence, for instance, or documented facts. Stuff like that. Not any more. Today, it seems, “truth” is what we call our own opinions, and those who agree with us are therefore truthful. Meanwhile, anyone who disagrees with us or who suggests we might be mistaken is lying, and news reports we don’t like, well they’re from the “dishonest media.”

Now to some extent this is nothing new. Humans have always been gifted at self-deception, and we’ve always been willing to accept statements that we like without evidence and to treat opposing views with skepticism. But there *is* something new today. As our media options have proliferated on TV and the internet, it has become possible to surround ourselves with our own prior opinions and never actually encounter arguments for opposing views. When everyone we know on Facebook and all the news we encounter during our day simply affirms what we already think, it soon becomes possible for us to conclude that our opinion is the only reasonable one. *Everyone* agrees, after all. This happens whether we’re getting all our news from Fox or from Huffington Post. When we remove ourselves from the challenge of other people’s ideas, we remove ourselves from perspective, from any objective standard against which to measure our own thoughts. You know, that thing we used to call Truth.

In this brave new world of choose-your-own-reality, even science is called into question. I'll talk more about science in a couple of weeks, but let me give one example today. One of the great triumphs of modern science is the vaccine. By means of vaccines we have wiped out polio and smallpox and eliminated hundreds of thousands of deaths every year from other diseases. Vaccines work. Science can prove it with, you know, facts. But then one doctor, Andrew Wakefield, published an article connecting vaccines to an increase in autism. Now, since that article appeared, several independent studies have gone over his research and found his methods flawed and his conclusions invalid. There isn't really a connection between vaccines and autism. But it doesn't matter. As long as you can find Wakefield's article on the internet and connect with a group of like-minded anti-vax people – like former TV host and Playboy model Jenny McCarthy – you can conclude that those studies are “biased” and “paid for by Big Pharma” and that the question is still open to debate. It's not. Vaccinate your children, all right?

How did we get to this place, where there seems to be no objective standard for truth, where, as the Book of Judges puts it, “each man does what is right in his own eyes”? I don't know for sure, but here's what I do know: we can't go back. This new world is here to stay, and – worse – it's partly right. Yes, we used to think we knew what Truth was, but what we often overlook is that historically we've based that certainty on different things. In the Middle Ages, we knew what Truth was: it was what the accepted authorities said. In the Reformation, we rejected those authorities, but we still knew what Truth was: it was what the Bible said. Then, in the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution, we still knew what Truth was: it was what could be proven by the scientific method. You see my point? We've had this revolution before, as again and again we have discovered that our objective standard for “Truth” actually didn't work as well as we thought. Today, we're in the middle of another such revolution, but this one calls into question *every* source of truth. Building on the understandings of modern psychology and physics, we are beginning today to realize that what we used to call “reality” is, rather, “my perception of reality,” and my perception will never be exactly like anyone else's. This doesn't mean there is no Truth; only that none of us will ever agree on it exactly.

A quick example. I'm preaching a sermon today. But no two people in this room will hear the same sermon. All of you who are awake are hearing the same words, but you're hearing a different message. Your hearing of what I am saying is affected by your own personality, your background, your race and gender, your knowledge base, the thing that happened to you last week that's been bothering you, whether you like me, and the state of your digestion. Now if I've done my job well and communicated clearly, then most of you will share a similar understanding of most of what I say with most of the others. But that's the best I can hope for. The truth-revolution that we are experiencing today simply extends that concept to the rest of reality. We don't *have* objective reality; all we have is our own skewed perception of it. Thus, all our previous sources of certainty, all that we used to hold up as the standard of “Truth,” are being called into question today. It can feel as if there is no solid ground left to stand on.

Now, let me try to reclaim some meaning for the concept of Truth, and let me start with our own particular source of Truth: the Holy Bible. Seriously? a modern person might ask. You're claiming Truth for that ancient book? What about that six-day Creation story, supposedly 6,000 years ago? What about the laws dealing with “four-legged” insects and prescribing

treatments for houses that get leprosy? What about the bits that forbid women to speak in church or the rules about how to treat your slaves? Okay, so let's start with that stuff. Can we please just move past the idea that the Bible is a pristine, perfect document dropped from heaven in the exact words of an omniscient deity who knows all history, science, and math? You've heard that idea, the "God said it! I believe it! That settles it!" attitude, the notion that every detail in the Bible has to be scientifically and historically accurate, or the whole Bible is invalidated. But the Bible never claims to have that sort of inspiration, and nothing in it supports that understanding. What we do have in this book is a thousand years worth of inspired writing by dozens of people who had experienced a transcendent God, each one differently, but all of them trying to extend that experience to others. Those ancient writers reflect the scientific understandings of their time, which – it turns out – were mostly wrong, but their experiences of God are as true today as they ever were. That's where the Bible's truth lies.

Now I realize that this description of the Bible will be offensive to many Christians and flat-out heretical to others. I have it on my calendar to worry about that. But in the meantime, can I just point out that this way of looking at the scriptures fits our modern world precisely. You see, as I said earlier, the new understanding of Truth doesn't deny that Absolute Truth exists; it only denies that any of us can claim to have found it. We are all limited by time and space and personality. All we can do is bring our different perceptions of Truth together to see if we can distill from them all a useful shared understanding of what is. And that's *exactly* how the Bible treats the ultimate Truth that is God. Yes, God is real, but never does the Bible claim to have God figured out. Never does it suggest that we can completely grasp God – in fact, the second commandment explicitly forbids our even trying. Instead, this book gives us glimpses of God – filtered through fallible human perception, but each containing something essentially true. And when you put them together, a picture begins to emerge of a God that is bigger and wilder and kinder and scarier and greater and more wonderful than any single picture could ever portray.

This is why Jesus said in the passage we read from the Sermon on the Mount that we need *all* the scriptures. Not because every word is infallible but because every word adds something to the larger picture and must be taken into account. And this is why 2 Peter warns the church to be cautious with Paul's letters – not because Paul was wrong, but because Paul is only one voice, which has to be listened to along with the other voices of scripture. Paul, like the rest of us, had his issues and if we elevate his voice above all others, we can end up twisting our picture of God. I'm looking at you, John Calvin. This is why our Bible contains sixteen different prophets, two completely different histories of Israel, and four different gospels, including the parts that contradict each other. It isn't that some of them are right and some are wrong but rather that all of them are limited and need the others to present a multi-dimensional picture of the deepest Truth that has ever been.

It can feel as if we've entered a Wild West of Truth, where nothing is certain. Well, we have. But that doesn't mean that there is no Truth, only that we have to look for it everywhere. God's Truth cannot be expressed adequately in a solo, but only by a full choir singing different parts, with rich harmonies and soaring descants. That's what we have in the Bible. It may not be the sort of Truth that some would like it to be, but it's better.

Years ago, a statistician in England went to a county fair and saw a contest: Guess the weight of this bull, and you can keep it. Hundreds guessed, and some people were close, but nobody got it exactly right, of course. But then this statistician had an idea. He added together all the hundreds of guesses, then took their average. It was exactly the weight of the bull. Statistical theory calls this the “Wisdom of Crowds.” The Bible’s like that. Yes, God was at work inspiring the writers, but all of them wrote from their own perspective, describing not God precisely but their *perception* of God. And through their different witnesses, somehow, the God found in this book is not just true but *more* true than any single witness could be. But don’t take my word for it. Read it.