

“The Truth Question”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for First UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, Sept. 13, 2020

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: www.fumcgj.org/sermons-2/

Scripture Text:

- Readers Theater on John 18:33-38 [NLT].
- References are also made to *Christ in Crisis? Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins/Harper One, 2019), by Jim Wallis.

OPENING

Everyone knows what a hurricane is, right? I checked with my favorite National Weather Service forecaster, and my paraphrase of that conversation is that a hurricane can be described as a weather phenomenon that began life as a region of low atmospheric pressure that then picked up energy and moisture from the ocean beneath it, began to rotate, and grow, and pick up more energy, winds, and moisture, and...pretty soon, Tropical Storm Sally becomes Hurricane Sally!

You know what a cyclone is? Basically, the same thing as a hurricane – it just takes place in the south Pacific or Indian Oceans; whereas, hurricanes take place in the Atlantic and northeastern Pacific oceans.

You know what a typhoon is? The same thing as a hurricane or a cyclone 😊; it just takes place in the northwestern Pacific Ocean.

Well, that got me to thinking...that's just like a snow storm and a thunder storm. I mean a snow storm is just a cold weather thunderstorm, right? Really, think about it...

- Snow is just rain that got caught up in a cold front!
- I mean...you let rain collect in a bucket, carry the bucket inside, check on it in an hour, and what do you have? A bucket of water. You let snow collect in a bucket, carry the bucket inside, check on it in an hour, and what do you have? A bucket of water!
- Driving snow can be blinding...driving rain and lightning can be blinding.
- And isn't an avalanche the same thing as a flash flood, just colder? You say an avalanche is far more dangerous and destructive: A whole mountainside of snow perhaps 10's of feet deep, careening down the valley, taking out trees, moving huge boulders, destroying homes and anything else in its path, claiming the lives of persons who don't get out of its way... We know about avalanches because we see them here pretty regularly.
- But does anyone remember the flooding on the Front Range in 2013? In fact, it was this very 4-day period of time beginning on Sept. 11th in 2013 when a huge rain system stalled over the eastern Rocky Mountains in the northern part of our State and unleashed a flash flood of Biblical proportions... careening down several valleys, taking out trees, moving huge boulders, destroying

homes and anything else in its path, claiming the lives of persons who didn't get out of its way...

Those are the same words I used to describe the avalanche!

- And don't the signs advise the same thing?
 1. "In case of avalanche, climb to higher ground."
 2. "In case of flashflood, climb to higher ground"!!

Like I said, a snow storm and a thunder storm are basically the same thing – like a hurricane, a cyclone, and a typhoon. Right? NO! A snow storm and a thunderstorm are totally different phenomena.

Pray with me, would you? "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts..." (Psalm 19:14, paraphrase)

SERMON THOUGHTS

Truth matters, and it matters in a fundamental way.

Pilate's question to Jesus, "What is truth?", was a rhetorical question, not an honest one asking Jesus to help him (Pilate) understand what "truth" is.

As such, it is the most cynical passage in the entire Bible, as I read it. It drips with

- disillusionment,
- skepticism,
- incredulity, and
- despair –

Because without the solid mooring of truth in life, we are boats adrift...at the mercy of the wind, waves, currents, and ever-changing tides of

- culture,
- public opinion,
- tyrants, or
- mob rule.

The fascinating thing about Pilate – the Roman Governor(!) – is that the most powerful man in that part of the world at that time was literally staring "Truth" in the face, and was rendered powerless by public opinion and mob rule to defend it.

And he *knew it!* According to all of the Gospel accounts, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but he lacked the moral mooring that truth provides and ended up capitulating to powers far less concentrated than he, as the Roman Governor of Judaea, possessed.

Truth matters, and it matters in a fundamental way.

TO THE SCRIPTURES

The Gospel of John is arguably the strongest voice for truth in the entire Bible. Let's look at the occurrences of the word "truth" in the NRSV:

- The word "truth" shows up 47 times in the whole of the Old Testament.
- In the New Testament, a collection a third the size of the OT, it shows up at twice that rate: 93 times.
- And of those 93 occurrences, 21 of them are in the Gospel of John, with the remainder of the books in the NT having 8 or fewer occurrences of the word.

And while some of the instances of "truth" in the New Testament equate it with factually accurate information – which, like our discussion of snow storms and thunderstorms illustrated in a humorous

way, is important – for the disciple of Jesus Christ, truth is first of all relational [Wallis, 88].

Jim Wallis in his book *Christ in Crisis?* says it this way:

“...for Jesus, the meaning of truth is linked with relationship – in fact, our very relationship to God. Truth is more than factual or propositional; Jesus sees it as relational. And that makes the concept of truth much deeper and more important than merely litigating the facts, though..., nothing in the gospel message allow us to ever ignore or obfuscate the facts.” [Wallis, 88]

Then, Wallis presents eight passages from the Gospel of John that powerfully support his thesis that for the Christian, truth is relational (cf. Wallis, 88-89). “In these [the Johannine] texts, ‘truth’ is manifested as faithfulness, obedience, and loyalty *to God*; so truth is about the choices we make that determine our spiritual lives – who we believe and follow.” [Wallis, 89, emphasis added.]

For the Christian, truth is grounded first and foremost in a personal and deeply committed relationship with God in Christ to which we are accountable. There is no other way to live out the Christian life and live into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Only after establishing that is the Christian equipped to safely enter into the socio-political fray that will test his or her “faithfulness, obedience, and loyalty to God”, often to the breaking point.

SERMON THOUGHTS

“Faithfulness, obedience, and loyalty to God” as our test for truth is the “tetherball pole” for us today, the anchor point in this discussion. Truth is measured against these three values in light of what we know of God.

Last week, we spelled that out in great detail: All we need to know about God, we can see in Jesus, the Word made flesh, who was there in the beginning, in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and in whose image and likeness we were created.

If a truth claim doesn’t stand up to the scrutiny of “faithfulness, obedience, and loyalty to God”, it is by this definition an untruth...a lie.

CONCLUSION

It is in the nature of politics to foster discussions on governance and public administration that can be closely aligned or diametrically opposed. All manner of rhetoric is used to persuade the listener to one point of view or another. I often end up deeply frustrated with the way these discussions are framed because it would seem that the champions of one position or another are either trying to convince me that a cyclone, a hurricane, and a typhoon are fundamentally different phenomena OR that a snow storm is the same thing as a thunderstorm!

Over the course of the next 7 weeks, in fact it’s already begun, these discussions are going to turn into shouting matches with a vested interest in convincing us of the truth of one position or another and of the

dire consequences of the opponents winning the contest.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, are you going to allow yourself to be swayed by the distortions of the shouting match, or are you going to give yourself to truth in your discernment? And if to truth, what are you going to use as your “lie detector”?

To paraphrase Patrick Henry, one of the founders of our country, “I know not what course others may take, but as for me,…” give me Christ, or with Pilate I will despair of any such notion as truth.

Let us pray...