

## Deeper Into the Truth

John 16:12-15

A sermon for Pentecost by the Rev. Dr. David Hosick '76, Board member



What is truth in a world cursed by “fake news”? “Fake news” is a neologism referring to fabricated news. It has little or no basis in fact but is presented as factually accurate. “Fake news” is not new. It is as ancient as Pharaoh Ramses’ propaganda portraying the Battle of Kadesh as a stunning victory for the Egyptians in the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.; and it is as contemporary as foreign countries’ use of social media to try to manipulate our presidential elections. Media conglomerates spread false stories via the internet to boost website profits. As such stories “trend” on Facebook and appear on Google’s top news search lists, they create cynicism and pessimism in hearts and minds around the world. What people, what sources, can we trust? How can we know what is right and wrong, and what is the correct course of action for the common good?

In the movie *Missing*, Jack Lemmon plays an American businessman who discovers that our government is lying to him about the whereabouts of his son, who went missing during a revolution in Chile. In a particular scene of the movie, a profound theological statement is uttered. While in Chile investigating, Edmond Horman (Lemmon) goes to a church in Santiago to collect his thoughts and pray. An embassy functionary arrives at the church to pick up Horman and finds him in the reading room studying the Bible. Noting that he has interrupted Horman’s devotions, the inquisitive official asks him what his religion is all about. “It’s about faith,” Horman replies. “What kind of faith?” persists the young man. “Faith in the truth,” answers Horman.

Our Christian religion is about faith in the truth. Perhaps, in the light of “fake news,” one asks with Pilate, “What is truth?” Christianity asserts, “Jesus Christ is the truth.” Presbyterians, in “A Declaration of Faith,” have declared:

Jesus Christ is the living Word of God ... The Spirit adds no different Word from God, but leads us deeper into the truth of God uttered in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the truth because he embodies the very truth of God. And it is the function of God’s Holy Spirit to lead us into Jesus and God’s truth. Our Christian faith contends that Jesus is the truth and that the truth of Jesus is of ultimate relevance for every generation of every people everywhere.

Today is Pentecost. We remember how the Holy Spirit fulfilled Jesus’ prediction of his arrival to complete Jesus’ ministry and mission. Jesus said, “(The Spirit) will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” Jesus had declared himself to be the truth (John 14:6), yet he still notes the incompleteness of his teaching. He assures us, however, that the Holy Spirit will guide us deeper into his truth. It is the Spirit’s continuing work to reveal the truth of Jesus and show each new generation the contemporary significance of Jesus for their own time. Through the work of the Spirit, the truth of Jesus is understood and applied in fresh and relevant ways for each successive generation.

Today, in all fields of scientific inquiry, the accepted facts of a dozen years ago are being reviewed and, in many cases, revised, because new information is always coming to the fore. Scientists try to standardize their knowledge, and, while they are at the job, new information is found that reshapes the knowledge. Reference books and texts must be edited. Knowledge expands and must be accounted for. We recognize this process as both necessary and helpful.

So we should not be surprised when Jesus gathers his disciples together on his last night with them and says, "I have many things to tell you, but you cannot bear them now." We should not be shocked or dismayed when Jesus notes the incompleteness of his teaching, though we might be confused. Earlier in this part of John's Gospel—the part we call "The Upper Room Discourse"—Jesus said, "I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father." "I have made known to you everything ...," yet "I still have many things to tell you." Can we harmonize these thoughts? Yes, in this sense: There is a difference between arithmetic and calculus. There is a difference between a seed and an apple, which both contains and grows from a seed.

Jesus told his disciples that the seeds of all knowledge about God and God's will and way in his creation had been planted in his ministry. Yet centuries of climes and conditions have been required for Christian theology to come to full bloom. For instance, the words of our text were first expressed around 30 C.E. They are key components of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, but further understanding of the person and nature of Jesus and the tri-unity of God were more fully expressed by the Council of Nicaea centuries later in 325 C.E. And, in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup>, ethicists such as Phillip Turner have shown how Christian ethics are based on the doctrine of the Trinity, while theologians such as Cornelius Plantinga have demonstrated how the Trinity is a philosophical necessity if God is love. Seeds have grown.

Jesus told his disciples he had more to tell them, but they were not yet ready to understand. It would require Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and the Pentecost arrival of the Holy Spirit for their continuing education. For the rest of us it has meant the compilation of the canon of Scripture over a century later, the development of the printing press in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the advent of the personal computer in the 20<sup>th</sup>. It has included the development of jet travel to the Holy Land for more study, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other archaeological wonders. And the truth is, we require even more knowledge and inspiration to bring to full bloom the seeds of truth Jesus planted. As the Puritans famously said, "God has yet more light to shed on the scriptures."

The good news is that we are not left on our own to search after truth like blind persons tripping in the dark. On Pentecost Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide us deeper into the truth. He promised, "When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." This promise resulted in the birth of the church and the writing and compilation of the New Testament. Under the Spirit's influence since then, each succeeding generation of Christians has worked to understand and apply Jesus' teaching for their time and place. Theologian and missionary Lesslie Newbiggin wrote:

The Holy Spirit is the one who leads the church through its encounters with new experiences, new cultures, new languages, and new forms of thought, until the fullness of the Truth is seen in Jesus, until God's purpose for the whole creation is complete, and all things are brought into unity with Jesus Christ as their centre. The true history of the church is the history of the Spirit's activity leading the church through its successive encounters with all the ranges of human experiences into the fullness of the truth.... It is the work of the Holy Spirit from age to age to show who Jesus is and how completely adequate Jesus is to be the king and head of the human race and the sovereign ruler of all things.

Newbiggin reminds me of the experience a couple had while enjoying breakfast in a lodge on Mount Mitchell in the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina. They were seated at a table by a window. As they dined, they soaked in the panorama. They saw the snow-capped mountain peaks, lush green forested slopes, and brilliant sky. They were awestruck and told their waiter they'd never seen such

beauty anywhere. He asked what they were planning for the day. They replied that they were going hiking with a local guide. And he replied, "If you think this is beautiful, wait 'til he shows you the view from the other side!"

Today, on Pentecost, Jesus says, "There is more beauty and grandeur and glory yet to be seen. The deeper you enter my truth, the more awesome and lovely it becomes as the beauty of God's love unfolds before you."

Jesus has planted seeds of theological, spiritual, and moral truth. He has sent the Holy Spirit to be our guide as we enter new times and places. The Spirit will lead us deeper and deeper into the truth. He will enable us to understand the issues of our generation from the perspective of Jesus. He will reveal to us what is right and wrong, and what is the correct course of action for the common good. The message of Pentecost is this: Be open and responsive to the Holy Spirit as he leads us deeper and deeper into the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Lovely, life-giving changes happen when we are!

Sources:

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- *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. III, No. 7.
- Lesslie Newbiggin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, Eerdmans, cited above.
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- Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. XI.