



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: TRINITY SUNDAY, JUNE 12, 2022  
PROVERBS 8:1-4, 22-31; CANTICLE 13:29-34; ROMANS 5:1-5; JOHN 16:12-15

## SEEKING TRUTH

**John 16:12-15** [*Jesus said to the disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."*]

You might have heard it said that we are living in a post-truth society. "Post-truth" – it gets used to describe a reality where emotions, often enflamed, and personally held, seemingly deeply subjective beliefs are more influential than actual, objective facts. It's suggested that a lack of trust in our institutions and a lack of trust in traditional sources of authority has left us, as a society, wary of what we're told, what we're told about things like vaccines, the role of the police, or the results of a presidential election. Society's apparent abandonment of objective truth is seen by many as a root cause of all that's wrong with today's society, as *the thing* that underpins society's fracturing, its

brokenness; an abandonment of objective truth is given as the cause of the table-thumping, raised voices, tense family gatherings, and political and civic impasse. We are living in a noisy, noisy society rife with ardently expressed disagreement and division. There seems to be very little today we all can agree on.

Our disagreement on truth divides us, and it can be dangerous, deadly. In this country we do not agree on 'the truth' about marriage, about gender, about sexuality, about race, about ability, about our economic and ecological realities. We do not agree on the truth of the constitution, starkly and plainly illustrated by

the passionately held, yet differing interpretations of its second amendment.

The pursuit of truth is a powerful motivator in western society. It is proclaimed, it is defended, it is fought for.

So what is it, what is truth?

Some truths are seemingly simple ones, ones that we might all agree on, or at least almost of all of us. We might agree that it is true we are here, gathered in this cathedral space, that it is Sunday, that Saint Mark's is in Seattle. This simple way of thinking about truth is as fact-based truth, and that is, we use our language to describe *the reality* of the world around us.

Other truths, though, are not so easily agreed upon. Once the reality I point to gets a bit complicated, differences in our understanding of truth quickly arise. For example, what can be said to be *true* about the causes of this city's housing crisis, or the ever-widening economic gap, of sky rocketing rents, or inflation, of incarceration rates. When we talk about *these* things, it's highly unlikely we'll all agree on the truth. Because if truth is understood to be a belief about reality, and the way I understand reality is different to the way you might understand it, we are likely not to agree on what is true about that reality.

Given our inevitable differences here, why are we still so drawn to the idea of *an* absolute truth, especially given the complexity and difficulty of finding consensus on what *it* is?

What does being the possessor of the truth offer us, what's its allure?

I might suggest that on the surface it seems to offer a promise of an understanding of the world that tells us exactly *how things are*, and that's a powerful thing in this cultural context. It's powerful because once we understand "how things are" - our truths become the justification of our actions - the good and the bad; the liberating as well as the oppressing and exploitative. This dominant culture we live in centers the idea of truth, truth as foundational, for all kinds of organizing principles, from legislation to lived and perpetuated cultural norms. And so what's important here, what's critical, is to never forget that truth, used in this way, is not a simple truth, it does *not* point directly and unarguably to a fact of our common reality. This form of truth has been established, and is maintained by *an authority*, usually by the group that holds power. Truth of this sort is held in the service of those who have articulated it. It is never an objective, eternal fixed truth for all time, rather it is a truth which enables, which justifies the way a system or a society functions, it permits it, sanctions it;

truth of this sort serves the purpose of those who have defined it.

We surely do need complex truth, although we struggle to agree on what that truth is. Because complex truth is our response to the world around us, it organizes our experiences and understandings, that truth then carries us into the future as it shapes our thinking, helping us decide how to be in the world, how to act, what choices to make.

And so, our next question this morning really must be, Who is it that decides, or has decided the truth we hold? The truth we each put to use in the world? For a long time, in Anglo-American culture, the truth-speakers, the truth-claimers have been scientists, academics, politicians, journalists – cultural authorities, cultural sources of truth peopled by a distinctly dominant and dominating group: usually white, usually male, of the privileged, educated class – and so the understandings of reality, the truths of *this* cultural context, that *this* society has inherited, are the organizing ideas of a limited and fairly homogenous group. Long-held truths about life, including truths about gender, race, nationality, sexuality, class, have been the truths of *a* particular group.

Truth is used as an anchoring, as a way of claiming permanence in a constantly shifting, often unpredictable, sometimes chaotic reality. Truth can, then, offer great comfort.

And so it can be hard to let go of a truth, to detach from the felt safety of its mooring, it can be destabilizing, it leaves us feeling vulnerable.

But despite the possibility of discomfort and the disorientation of uncertainty, we must challenge and question: who, or what, what authority, has lead us to the truths we hold, and what kind of a reality does our truth reflect? Perhaps, there are indeed some truths from which some of us *must* detach ourselves, cultural “truths” which have been shown - by the harm they have done, and continue to do in this world, to be, in actual fact, dangerous, deadly falsehoods.

Next question then: Who, or what could be/should be guiding *us* into truth?

Back in chapter 14 of John’s gospel text Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus. Jesus is the truth.

Nigerian theologian Teresa Okure lays it out plain. Jesus came, she says, to show us how to

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<sup>1</sup> 14:6

find truth, to show us what the referent point of truth should be, so that it doesn't depend on my understanding of truth or your understanding of truth, but on all of us together struggling to understand truth from Jesus' perspective.<sup>2</sup>

When we are searching for the truth, she advises, we need the truth of the gospel as our guide and goal. Jesus is gospel: his life, ministry, passion, death and resurrection is gospel - and it is the Spirit of *this* life which leads us into truth, which transcends culture, transcends the death-bringing truths of our oppressive and exploitative culture; the Spirit of truth, brought out of the life of Jesus, illuminates what is and what is not from God. It is the spirit of a life centered on being good news - the good news of God's liberating reality. Freedom from economic and systemic exploitations and oppressions, newness and fullness of shared life lived in community, within which the love of God flows freely and is magnified.

And so if we allow the Spirit of truth to lead us in all truth we will perceive more clearly that around us *which is gospel* - we will perceive

gospel truth in the struggle for justice and freedom from persecutions, in the struggle for the equitable sharing of this world's material wealth, in the prioritization of the "we" over the "I", of stewardship over personal profit. The hard question here, perhaps, is will we allow ourselves to be led? Can we be honest ... are we holding onto a truth that correlates with the world the way it *is* or with the way it is called to be as God's kingdom reality?

The truth we must seek as Christians, the truth we must allow ourselves to be led into, is a response to our time, led by the Spirit of gospel truth, shaped by the life of Jesus, remembering that our understanding of truth is influenced by all we bring to its seeking, and the purpose for which we seek it.

Seeking truth, being led by the Spirit of truth, has the power to bring us together in response to this current moment, and to embolden us to intervene in the world, gospel truth has the power to bring us together, and closer to God. And in this critical, vital task, it is the Spirit of Truth that has been sent to be our guide.

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<sup>2</sup> Okure, Teresa. 2011. "What Is Truth?" *Anglican Theological Review* 93 (3): 413.