

To Tell the Truth

Exodus 20:17; Acts 4:36-5:11

John W. Kuykendall
Davidson, North Carolina

“Pilate asked him, ‘What is truth?’” (John 18:38)

One of the most troubling passages of the story of Jesus for me is the description of his encounter with Pontius Pilate which is recorded in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus had just been telling Pilate that his mission in the world was “to testify to the truth,” to testify to the faithful and consistent presence of God as the source of meaning in human life. Jesus said, “I came into the world, to testify to the truth.” So Pilate said, “What is truth?” Ships passing in the night (at least it looks that way to me). In fairness, though, it’s hard to know what Pilate even meant by that question, given the evidence at hand. Frederick Buechner in his famous riff on Pilate supposes that he asked the question “because in a world of so many truths and half-truths, he is hungry for truth itself, or failing that, at least for the truth that there is no truth.”¹

Maybe so. What do you think? What motivation for the question “What is truth?” Indeed the question may have come from any of a number of internal moods or persuasions: skepticism, cynicism, curiosity, perhaps even some agonized quest for meaning in life. All kinds of speculation about that little question: *why* it was asked, *when* it was asked, and *by whom* it was asked in that particular time.

But there it is; and it’s really hard—and maybe unprofitable—to go beyond what we know. According to the Fourth Gospel, the basic fact is this: Pilate put the question on the table, and either he wasn’t willing to wait around for an answer, or the only answer he was to receive was a profound and enigmatic silence. So he left the question for the rest of us in generations yet unborn to ponder as we seek to find a path through the day to day.

I

This is a sermon about the significance of truth in our lives. Correct me if I’m wrong, but it seems to be a timely topic. We are not in a particularly happy season these days when it comes to a common understanding of that word *truth*. The cover story in *Time* earlier this month carried a banner which probably summed up the mood of our circumstance: “Somebody’s not telling the truth.” What a quaint understatement! Terms such as “false news” and “alternative facts” and “disinformation” and “fact checkers” and “Pinochios” and “pants-on-fire ratings” and the consequent and frequent use of such flagrant words as “*liar!*” have become a part of our everyday discourse about people in the public eye.

This is not necessarily a situation unique to these few years of our lives—or in the life of this old world of ours, come to that—but it is no less distressing to many of us nonetheless. It is a truism, I think, that “you do not just live in a world...; a world lives in you;”² and the world that inhabits each one of us just now is one in which the coin of the realm, both in public and private discourse, seems a failure to tell the truth, spoken openly without apology as though it were a matter of necessity and habit. To resurrect an old saying you may have heard growing up: “Seems like there

are some folks who will tell a lie when the truth would serve them better!” (Please do not misunderstand me; I intend all this as a *cultural*, not a *political* statement!) And couple with that the further cultural observation that revolutions in technology within the lifetime of almost every person in this room have made it possible for *anyone* to disseminate any information without or even against considerations of its truthfulness; and the consequences are truly unknown and unknowable. So what’s a Christian to do? Where can any disciple of Jesus Christ—or anyone who aspires to be—stand “in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side?”³ What does what you believe have to do with what you say—and hear—in an age and situation in which the line between truth and falsehood is being so vigorously and variously drawn and challenged?

What is truth? Does it have anything to do with our faith? The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (which some of us learned at—or over!—our mothers’ knees) gives this definition of God: “God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in... being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and...*truth*.” “God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in...*truth*.” But here we are: finite, temporary, and very, very changeable, trying to relate to a God who is the God of truth. And that *truth* which is part of the nature of God is expressed in God’s faithfulness, God’s trustworthiness, God’s dependability, God’s saving and caring presence in our lives and the life of all God’s creation.

And Jesus came declaring that he was bearing witness to the truth, testifying to that aspect of God’s relationship to us; and more, he was *personifying* that truth in and through his own presence. He said on more than one occasion that he *was/is/is to be* himself the truth: “the way, the truth, and the life.” So let’s stipulate at the outset that the basis of truth in the life of any one of us who claims to be Christian is the truth that comes from God, the truth made incarnate in the person and work of the Christ. And further stipulate, if you are able, that it is the task and obligation of discipleship to discover ways to express God’s truth in a world which falls short, to find the point of connection between Truth (capital T) and truth in the way we live our lives and tell others of our understanding of life.

II

It goes without saying, I suppose, that the Bible has quite a few things to say about telling the truth. Open it anywhere and chances are the topic of telling the truth comes up in some regard within a few pages one way or the other. I choose two examples today; others can choose differently and even better.

Take first of all that one of the Ten Commandments I quoted as our Old Testament lesson this morning, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” It sounds like instructions for a judicial process—and it is—but don’t let archaic language throw you off the point. “False witness” is any assertion that falls short of the truth. Here’s a gloss on it from our Heidelberg Catechism:

Question 112: What is required in the ninth commandment?

Answer: That I do not bear false witness against anyone, twist anyone’s words, be a gossip or a slanderer, or condemn anyone without a hearing. Rather I am required to avoid, under penalty of God’s wrath, all lying and deceit as the works of the devil himself. In judicial and all other matters I

am to love the truth, and to speak and confess it honestly. Indeed, insofar as I am able, I am to defend and promote my neighbor's good name.

It sounds like our forebears were right serious about the matter, doesn't it? And they surely had scriptural warrant for their intensity. As the Book of Deuteronomy amplifies the "Ten Words" from Sinai, the penalty mandated for breach of this commandment reads as follows: "If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.... Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye; tooth for tooth; hand for hand; foot for foot" (Deuteronomy 19:18-19). It is serious business indeed to tell a lie in the community of Israel, or so it would seem. Truth is of the essence of God's being and of God's relationship with humankind. The point is that failing to tell the truth is potentially—and quite essentially—destructive of life in relationship to God and God's created order. You simply can't tell lies to one another or about one another and expect to live together in peace and harmony. Lesson number one: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Period.

III

Then one other lesson on this matter of telling the truth: Have you ever heard our New Testament lesson read in church before? Well, I haven't, in these 79 years of church-going; and God knows—I mean that faithfully and literally—God knows I never thought of preaching on it before now. Ananias and Sapphira, what a bizarre story! But before we go any further, let me say that I don't believe this is just a cautionary tale about keeping up to date on your church pledge! (Though that's not a bad idea.) Clearly there's much more at work in the telling of this tale than that.

The writer of the Book of Acts makes a special effort to remind us ever and again that the new community of believers brought together in Jerusalem after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and after the coming of Holy Spirit into the midst of infant company of faith—that *that* community was born to be different, born to be *holy*, set apart, born to be "the body of Christ."

Among other things, those first disciples pooled their resources to be sure that no one suffered need. The text says, for instance, that Joseph, nicknamed "Barnabas," "son of encouragement," sold a field and donated *all* the proceeds to the Church. Then comes this strange story: A man called Ananias (otherwise unknown to us... and maybe for good reason!) and his wife Sapphira conspired to deceive the community and take credit for more than their due. And the rest of the story might be a sort of cartoon were it not for the sudden and shocking outcome. First Ananias, then Sapphira, confronted with the reality of the lie—a lie, Peter says, told not to the Church but directly to God!—each of them drops dead! Not exactly a story which is in keeping with "the era of good feelings" that we usually associate with that first devout, Spirit-filled cluster of Christians. It raises all sorts of questions. You might want to talk about this over lunch today. Or not. At any rate, there it is.

And sort it out and try to explain it any way you wish—goodness knows, people have tried to find Gospel in it—but one salient and unmistakable moral to the story has to be that the telling of lies in the community of faith poses a real and serious threat to the health and even to the existence of the Church; and that might well hold

true for the Church in any place in any generation.

The telling of the truth (little t) within and among the body of believers is the only adequate way to honor Truth (capital T) which is a part of the very nature of God. Anything less has the savor of death about it.

IV

Now let me go back to the basic question I raised earlier (and this is where I may stop preaching and start meddling). What's a Christian to do? What do we do, you and I, as disciples (or disciple wanna-bes) living in a world which seems to lack motivation to prefer truth over lying as a *modus operandi*? We can't simply tell a politician or a polemicist or a bloodshot partisan, "Hey, buddy, you're *lying*. Tell us the truth." Or maybe we can; maybe we *must*, if we take our faith seriously. Maybe we *must*, as we listen and as we talk, and as we have dialogue with those from whom we differ, and also, perhaps, with whom we agree. Maybe we dishonor the faith we profess if we *don't* make it clear that we intend to speak the truth insofar as it is within our ken, and in turn, we expect the truth to be spoken to us.

Now, it occurs to me that such intentions start at home: truth-telling with yourself and those nearest and dearest. Let's not get sidetracked just now into a petty discussion of "white lies." ("No, that bowtie doesn't make you look foolish" or "Yes, this apple pie is *better* than my Mama used to make.") Let's leave aside such peripheral matters and also forego the philosophical questions as to whether or not you should tell the truth to the murderer at your front door whose intended victim is hiding in your coat closet.⁴ The real issue is how you *as a faithful person* come to terms with truth in your own life. Consider the possibility that telling the truth *to yourself about yourself* may be the hardest thing to do? Indeed, it is entirely possible that the greatest lies we tell are lies *to ourselves about ourselves* as we try to craft reality so that it conforms to our needs and expectations. N. T. Wright comments on the story we have read that "the real deep-level problem about lying is that it misuses or abuses the highest faculty we possess: the gift of expressing in clear speech the reality of who we are, what we think, and how we feel."⁵

Life depends upon telling the truth. Life in the human community, beginning with ourselves and our families, is premised upon telling the truth. I have a dear young six-year-old friend who recently became a bit too creative with magic markers on the wall of her bedroom, and for three days it was her steadfast contention that the appearance of the graffiti was nothing short of a miracle wrought by some magical intruder. Finally, the truth came out, and she subsequently sent this note to her parents (spelling excused!): "I'm sorry I told a lie. I will never tell a nother lie unless I have a surprise. I'll try to ern your trust back by telling the truth from the start. I will follow the rules and not be sneky. Love Anna" (not her real name).

Telling the truth needs to begin at home, in the closeness of family: "telling the truth in love." But that cannot be where it ends. So I beg you to ponder the following statement from your own point of view. (And if you think I'm about to address "the elephant in the room," maybe I am; but let me just say that I know that there are elephants and donkeys and more than a few zebras here. So you need to name the beast for yourself!) But what do you make of this statement: We have an equal obligation to tell the truth within the larger human family, those known and unknown, and also to live with expectant insistence upon being told the truth in return. Please don't wait

for me or anyone else to tell you when or where such things become necessary. You must decide for yourself. But do recollect as you make that decision that as heirs of the Reformed heritage, we come from a tradition that has more than occasionally found it necessary to speak truth to power and done so candidly and without apology. Be it a domineering church or an authoritarian political power over nearly five centuries in places such as Switzerland and France and Hungary and Scotland and England and colonial American and even this “sweet land of liberty” in which we are privileged to live, in all those times and places, women and men of faith have been bold in telling the truth, sometimes in clearly adversarial circumstances, and they have also insisted upon hearing the truth from friend and foe alike.

So when and if such an occasion arises, God grant us and all faithful people the courage to say, “*Tell us the truth.*” It is an act of faith and discipleship.

Notes

1 In *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: Harper, 1977), 14.

2 *Ibid.*, 3.

3 James Russell Lowell, “Once to Every Man and Nation” (poem).

4 For ideas here and elsewhere in this section, see Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1955), 97-105.

5 N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part One* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 81.