

SERMON: "WHAT IS TRUTH?"

**TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT ISAIAH 59:1-15
NEW TESTAMENT JOHN 18:28-38**

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Churchwide Confirmation Series**

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INTRODUCTION

The prophet Isaiah said of his time, **"Truth has fallen in the public square."**
Would he not say the same thing of our time?

This sermon is a call to repentance, a call to take an honest, critical and merciful look at myself, yourself, ourselves and ask where we have fallen short and where I can, you can, we can do better. The big picture question before us is this. It is the question, Pilate (the one in power) asked of the accused man before him, Jesus of Nazareth ... "What is truth?"

My experience is that some sermons stick with you. My pastor in college, Dr. Charlie Hasty preached on this passage from John 18. I will always remember how he answered Pilate's question. He ended his sermon saying, "What is truth?' You'll notice there is no answer. Jesus just stood there. There is your answer. Jesus is the answer."

As we wrestle with the question, "what is truth?" I pray that image sticks with you Jesus just standing there – sitting there next to you in the pew, standing there when you're typing, talking or texting. Jesus there. Jesus here.

We will come back around to that passage, that image later
Before we get back to that answer, let's be all Presbyterian and talk about process even go so far as the quote our church constitution, the Book of Order

This is from the section of the foundation of Presbyterian polity, two sections that appear one after the other – truth and goodness, mutual forbearance

Put images / quotes on screen one at a time

Truth and Goodness - That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior's rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them." And that no opinion can either be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man's opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.

MUTUAL FORBEARANCE, MUTUAL REPENTANCE

Mutual Forbearance - That, while under the conviction of the above principle we think it necessary to make effectual provision that all who are admitted as teachers be sound in the faith, we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.

We were going to focus this morning on the question asked of the confirmands “will you devote yourself to fellowship?” In a way we very much still are!

Some of you, many of you, are quite anxious about this sermon, this subject I hear and feel that anxiety. I have also felt your prayers for this sermon. I know the mere mention of the former president’s name or legal issues raises the blood pressure – some might get angry, some defensive, a bit of everything really. I do not mean to add to that anxiety

But if the Church as a community of people who believe in doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God, a grace-dependent people ... if we cannot talk about the question, “what is truth?” what good are we to the larger world. the world down the pew and down the street?

We need to be guided by our constitution – both in being careful and prayerful not to put truth and falsehood upon a level AND by practicing mutual respect understanding and affirming that people of good character and principles may differ

I’d suggest that what that looks like for us here and now is mutual forbearance and mutual repentance. And let me be clear, by mutual repentance I’m talking to myself, to your self and to ourselves. Sermons on repentance about how those other people need to get right with God ... they’re not right

This passage from Isaiah has two movements - God’s response to the people’s complaint (including a description of the people’s sin – it is about a lack of truth) and then with an honest admission on their sin ... repentance

Put Isaiah 59:1-4, 8 on screen

See, the LORD’s arm is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies; your tongue mutters wickedness. No one brings suit justly; no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas; they speak lies, conceiving mischief and bearing iniquity ... The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their ways. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace.

TRUTH IN PUBLIC

The people seem to have blamed the Good Lord for the fact that the return home has not been so smooth or quick. That notion is dismissed quickly, verses 1-2 ... God's hand is not too short to save. Their inequities are the barriers

One of those barriers being the lies they have spoken, the breakdown in their legal system – no one goes to law honestly, no one brings suit justly their empty pleas, their lies (mentioned twice now). This is not the only place the prophets bring up their 'court system.' The language used to talk about justice are references to the gate, the public square – where they held court

The question for us in our context talking about truth and lies is this
What happens when we do not trust our justice system? When we say it is biased?
What happens when anger overwhelms evidence, when fear and falsehood speak louder than facts? What happens when we,
to quote the movie, "can't handle the truth?"

Listen to all the talk about weaponization, about 'lawfare' (that's a new term)
And ask "where does this lead? Not just with these cases, but beyond that?"

Before we go further, let me go back to 1984 – the book, not the year
The book by George Orwell was published in 1949. Soon after World War 2
Hitler and Mussolini very much still in mind. The book looked ahead to
a probable world where Big Brother controlled everything, including
what the people would hear and know and think. Think North Korea today

Another writer, Aldous Huxley, countered Orwell's dystopian vision with his own
Huxley argued that the 'powers that be' would keep hold of their power not by
withholding information. No, they would overwhelm us with it, like a firehose.
so much so we wouldn't know who or what to believe

Seeking the truth in our context with most Americans now getting the news
through social media – Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok. And then on the internet
also controlled by algorithms that feed us what we already like thereby often
reinforcing our biases ... the firehose imagery makes sense to me

We are flooded with information, including plenty of half-truths, distortions of the truth,
false equivalents and falsehoods. That includes misinformation (think gossip,
things that may begin with "you wouldn't believe" and "have you heard?"
And it includes intentional disinformation, lies meant to mislead.

Amidst the deluge of disinformation and distraction and divisions,
finding the truth and being shaped by it is going to take some work on our part
I'll be so bold as to suggest a few questions / considerations, use some alliteration
I'd encourage you to think about consequences, connections and context

CONSEQUENCES, CONNECTIONS & CONTEXT

Put image on screen with these three words

I've already said a little bit about thinking about the consequences

If our understanding of the truth paints the whole system with a broad brush
what happens next? One of the answers I've heard suggested is payback

You investigate us, prosecute us. We do the same with you. And like Lamech
(Genesis chapter 4) who vowed vengeance, we do so 77 times over.

We have already heard and seen this. And what good has it done?

The consequences can be and have been worse than speech or spectacle.

Believing the FBI is part of a scheme, offices and officers have been attacked.

Threats have been made. People have been targeted and hurt.

That is what happens when our supposed truth insists on
someone being a victim and someone else being a villain.

Truth should not lead us so easily to vengeance and violence.

If we are to love God and neighbor, seeking truth means thinking about
consequences. It also means thinking about connections,

how things connect to one another. I'm a big believer in synthesis.

In our post modern world we are used to analysis, taking a deeper dive.

We do that quite often and we often do it rather well. But what I learning
is that taking a step back to see how things connect is just as (and maybe
even more) helpful. So, as we seek the truth amidst all the things that
claim to be true ... please ask how they connect, if they connect.

That is true for all the cases involving Mr. Trump – previous legal settlements,
previous findings in civil cases, other pending cases. But not just those

Also cases involving his businesses and foundation, his employees and allies

And not just those. But other cases too – Hunter Biden, Robert Menezes too

Is truth whatever we say it is, whatever works best for our interests and agenda?

Is our understanding of truth or justice purely partisan? Is it a case of
'I cheer my team's victories and complain about the refs when we lose?'

Ok. This is sermon about repentance. I admit I have done that ... often!

It helps us in seeking the truth to think about, be honest about consequences

and connections (common sense works better here than conspiracies do)

and context ... Again, honesty about who we are, when and where we are

Here it helps to admit our own bias, what we may want to be true ... but may not be

Remember. The person to whom we tell the most lies is ourselves

Those lies can be many and varied from "I'm not good enough"

to "I'm always right" to all sorts of other things that simply are not true

FROM REFLECTION TO REPENTANCE

One way to pay attention to our context is to pay attention to our own bias
We each are creatures of our context, shaped by our unique when and where
We are not objective, we can be on occasion (especially in a courtroom
where we hear the evidence, not the spin, where we are bound by law
to speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth).

We can also be wrong, just plain wrong. That includes me and you singular
and us plural. That includes on occasion, despite the safeguards of the system,
juries and judges. That's why our justice system includes an appeal process.
The courtroom in Manhattan where Mr. Trump was tried and convicted
is the same courtroom where the so-called "Central Park Five" were also
tried and convicted. They have all since been exonerated.

Recognizing our own bias should help us recognize our own wrong
Like the affirmation of faith says when it says "We accept lies as truth."
Recognizing our sin (our words and our works, our silence and complicity)
should, can and will lead us to repentance

That is what happens in Isaiah, chapter 59.
These are the verses after the voice changes to the people's voice,
(yours changing to ours) to them giving voice to their honest confession

Put image on screen, Isaiah 59:12-15

**For our transgressions before you are many, and our sins testify
against us. Our transgressions indeed are with us, and we know
our iniquities: transgressing and denying the LORD and turning away
from following our God, talking oppression and revolt, conceiving
lying words and uttering them from the heart. Justice is turned back,
and deliverance stands at a distance, for truth stumbles in the public
square, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and whoever
turns from evil is despoiled.**

The truth is that truth has stumbled in the public square, that truth is lacking.
That was true for Isaiah and for Israel then. It is true for us and for America now.
Can we and will we hear that God's honest truth as a call to repentance?

And again, not their repentance, those people, the ones with whom I disagree
I'm talking about my repentance, your repentance, their repentance, our repentance.
I'm talking about the repentance of those who might leave here today angry with me
And those who might shake my hand and with a smirk say, "nice sermon,
I know some people here today who really needed to hear that."

SUMMARY

Now let me try and bring this back around to Jesus before Pilate

Another thing I keep learning is that a call to repentance is more than pointing to what is wrong. It's much like constructive criticism. If it is going to work it is best to point to a way forward, a better way. Jesus does that in several ways in his conversation with Pilate. We pick it up midway through ...

Put image on screen – John 18:36-38

Jesus answered, “My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”

I mentioned one example earlier. Jesus answered the question by just standing there. He is the truth as he said earlier in John 14, **“I am the way, the truth and the life.”** We want to see the truth? We see it in him. Not some doctrine per se, Not some article or argument. We see truth in a person. In the person, works and words of Jesus.

Put image on screen of people listening to Jesus

Jesus hints at that in what he did say to Pilate ...

“Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Thank you for listening to my voice for what has been a longer than usual sermon

My prayer is that in what I have tried to say ...
you will have heard truth,
you will have heard his voice, Jesus' voice.