

12/23/2012 First Presbyterian Church of Allegan

John 14:1-6

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God^[a]; trust also in me. ² In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.”

⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really knew me, you would know^[b] my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

John 1:17

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Strong’s:

truth, but not merely truth as spoken; truth of idea, reality, sincerity, truth in the moral sphere, divine truth revealed to man, straightforwardness.

alētheia (from [227](#) /*alēthēs*, "true to fact") – properly, *truth* (true to *fact*), *reality*.

[In ancient Greek culture, [225](#) (*alētheia*) was synonymous for "reality" as the *opposite of illusion*, i.e. *fact*.]

Today in our exploration of the first Chapter of John, we come to a term that has had a lot of philosophical ink spilled over it. Today we are exploring the very deep word, "Truth" and what it means when **we** hear it and what the first Century hearers of the Gospel of John would have understood it when they heard it. --Now, the investigation of what is true and how you define truth or even how we as humans understand truth goes back from our modern philosophers writing philosophical papers and books about this term today all the way back through the centuries to the Greek philosophers who lived 400 years before Jesus walked in Palestine. Today, however we will just cover part of the history of this term.

What is truth? What do you mean when you say that something is "True"? While you may not think that your understanding of what truth is has anything practical to do with your life, it actually has a lot to do with how we think today, and it really makes a difference in what we believe we can do to change themselves or others. The existence of truth is also a very fundamental part of your beliefs and your Christianity, and as such, it is good to take a little time to investigate what this term means and how it can effect your faith and life.

In today's world, philosophers describe the era that we live in as "Postmodern". One of the indicators that they see that we are no longer in the "modern" era of our collective reasoning is that there has become a prevalence of thinking that is defined as "Relativistic." --You probably have heard of this way of thinking even though you may not have had a word to describe it. Relativism puts a great emphasis on individual culture and individual choice. A common relativistic comment would be, **"Well what is true for me, may not be true for you."** Or dismissing some behavior that we find distasteful to us personally with an explanation of, **"Well, that is an ok thing to do in their culture."** Relativism is used a lot when people from different religions get together and try to live in peace and tolerance with each other. As the number of people has increased on our planet and as communications between people groups have increased in speed and frequency, relativism has become more frequently used as a way to get along and not argue with each other. --- It is a strictly practical move to validate someone else's truth as well as your own and to agree to not fight about it. It establishes some ground rules that allow people to focus on the task at hand together while agreeing to not argue about the big issues such as religion or life philosophy. Relativism enables people in China to work with people from the US to import and export goods and to create this

global economy that we live in. Relativism has been adopted as a practical way to further global peace.

But while this idea of relativism has been adopted in our postmodern world as a practical adaptation so that we can live with our cultural and religious differences, relativism is also fundamentally dangerous way of thinking. -- For example, what if your truth is that you believe that all Americans or all Israelis should be murdered, --that sort of belief is definitely not conducive to global trade, communication or peace. If the only way that people can be judged as being good is on the basis of what they believe is true in their own minds, we can have no such thing as universal laws, and we as a global community are in huge trouble.

But philosophically, **Relativism** has no ground to stand on, and it cuts its own logical throat. If truth can simply be **anything** that I believe in, and truth is simply a product of my thoughts and my own personal assignment of labeling something as true; then relativism itself is nothing more than an amusing personal opinion. It cannot describe all of reality. If the only evidence that supports Relativism is from the whims of my personal imagination, it is no stronger than that. If my personal truth has no basis in this real world that we live in, we could believe that $2+2=5$ and that all of

us can fly if we jump off of buildings. If anything at all can be true, without looking at the quality of the evidence for it, there would be no basis for anything scientific or anything technological. Life as we know it could not exist.

Another philosophical theory of truth used today is the **consensus** theory. This is the theory that something can be defined as true if enough people believe that it is so. This theory initially seems useful because if we used it, then it would then give any widely accepted religious groups the ability to define their beliefs as true. But this theory of truth also has problems. For example, at the time of Christ, everyone believed that the world was flat. This was a known and widely accepted truth. Everyone believed that the world was flat and would tell you so. But even a worldwide collective agreement that the world was flat could not change the globe of our planet into an immense plane. There was a reality outside of any individual's mind or belief system that was untouched by that thought or definition of truth, no matter how widely held it was.

This type of thinking can also be dangerous if a religious group has a charismatic leader. In 1997, the 39 members of the Heavens Gate, a religious group in California rented a beautiful mansion in a gated

community. Each of these members completely believed that they were really extra terrestrial beings who needed to shed their earthly bodies so that they could be collected by a UFO which was coming by the earth in the wake of the Comet Hale-Bopp. They believed that the earth was about to be recycled and that the aliens aboard the UFO would take them to the next level of existence if they could simply prove that they hated living on this world enough. In order to leave their hateful bodies and this world behind, the 39 members of Heaven's Gate committed Mass Suicide over the course of 3 days by taking poison and putting plastic bags over their heads. Authorities found the dead all lying neatly in their own bunk beds, wearing brand new black shirts, sweat pants and new tennis shoes. They all had "Heaven's Gate Away Team" arm patches. Their truth seemingly had some holes in it.

While there are other philosophical ways of defining "truth" -- the way that we all actually really use the word truth and the way that we really believe that truth works, is that truth actually has a real connection to real things in this real world. This is called the **correspondence** theory of truth. For example, when I tell you that I have three cats in my house, that truth is not based on me simply imagining or believing that I have three cats in my

house as it would be if **all truth was relative**, or because that everyone agrees that I must have three cats in my house as would be the case if all **truth was created by consensus**. The truth that I have three cats in my house corresponds to our actual reality and that can be verified by our senses and by testing. If you go to my house, and if you search for them, you will find three cats there. They may even let you pet them. By testing and with our senses, in the correspondence theory of truth, we can establish that something is really true. Truth can be verified and is reliable. --No matter how many times you count them you will find that there are three cats. This is the way that we comprehend that something matches with actual reality and is not just true in the fancies of our imagination.

This definition of truth was in place long before Jesus was born. The classical Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in 400 BC had this correspondence theory of truth, and this understanding of truth was the only one in existence when John wrote his Gospel. Truth was something that had its basis in reality, in actuality in this world. So when John refers to Jesus the Word made flesh as "Truth" there is a connection to the real, the actual. John is advocating that Jesus is real and verifiable with our human senses and in reality God had come to earth. This Jesus

was not just an illusion, and this the truth that was Jesus was not just in the spiritual realm. God come to earth was actual and as real and as true a reality as John himself holding the quill and writing the gospel.

At the same time that John was advocating for the reality of Jesus, the Greeks and later the Romans had a goddess by the name of Truth. In Greek she was known as Aletheia, and later under the Romans she was known by her Latin name Veritas. She was the spirit of truth, truthfulness and sincerity.

In Greek mythology from the 6th Century BC, a fable is told about Aletheia/ Veritas:

"A man was journeying in the wilderness and he found Truth standing there all alone. He said to her, 'Ancient lady, why do you dwell here in the wilderness, leaving the city behind?' From the great depths of her wisdom, Truth replied, 'Among the people of old, lies were found among only a few, but now they have spread throughout all of human society!'"

Within this context of what the word Truth meant in the first century, John in verse 17 asserts that Grace and Truth came to this world through Jesus Christ. And later on in John 14:6, Jesus asserts that he himself is the Aletheia or the truth. Instead of saying that Jesus simply knew the truth

about all things, that he had some sort of divine Omniscience, instead the author of John is saying something very different. He is asserting that we as humans can know the truth about the reality of our existence, because Jesus was God come to earth. That our ability to know and to understand our reality and spiritual reality as true is because the Word became flesh and came among humanity. And that this spirit of truth, this abstract thing that the Greek culture envisions as having abandoned humanity to live with it's lies has come to be again with humanity in order to give us a correct and true perspective on the way that things are and the way that things ought to be.

So what does all of this mean for us here today? What do these philosophical concepts have to do with the way that we live and the way that we understand the world we interact with. First of all, while we may give lip service to the idea that another person's truth is as good as our own, that kind of relativistic thinking isn't how we actually live in the world. More so than at any other time in history, we live in a world where we test things with the scientific method and we are continually shaping and sharpening our understanding of the reality that we live in. We are always seeking to know the truth more fully. We would be more honest with ourselves and others if we did not pretend that truth was relative and

verified only by our own beliefs. By better understanding what we actually believe, we will be able to have beneficial conversations with others who believe differently without resorting to actions of violence or intolerant shouting.

Secondly, this idea that Jesus is truth, and that truth came into this world through Jesus Christ gives us two anchors for our faith. First that God becoming human in the person of Jesus was a real event. --Real and verifiable as true in the most basic form of the world. And secondly, that the ability to understand truth, and the ability to live into truth did not abandon civilization, but truth came into it, and truth embraced this world in order to show them how to live. Jesus came as the personified spirit of truth, sincerity and comprehension of reality. What a beautiful and true gift that we can live into this Christmas! Amen!