



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

October 15, 2017

To Tell the Truth

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

To Tell the Truth

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

© 2017 by Dr. Jim Gilchrist and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: October 20, 2017

Pilate asked him, "What is truth?" (John 18:38)

When children are young, we try to teach them about the world, and in the beginning, at least, they're eager to learn. Who's that? That's Sissy. What's this? A ball. What color is the ball? Red.

There's an endless array of people and things to sort out and name when we start out in life, and then there are all kinds of connections to make. If you're hungry, you learn to ask for something to eat. You learn how to avoid things that might hurt you: Don't touch that; it's hot and you might get burned. You learn how to count things, and add them up: If you have two pennies and you add three more, now you have five.

Besides naming and describing things, and figuring out how one thing relates to another, children learn to relate to other people, too. Don't hit your sister; that hurts, and you wouldn't want somebody to hit you. If you want people to be nice to you, you should be nice to them.

In the course of learning all about the world, children soon come across the notion of truth. At first it's mostly implicit. Is the ball green? No, it's red. Does two plus three equal four? No, it's five. Before long, they learn that you can ask the same questions in a different way, in terms of what's true and what isn't. Two plus three equals four: true or false? That's false. We live in Pennsylvania. That's true.

Long before we learn the words "true" and "false," we already know what they're about. What's true is the way things really are. What's false is a claim that isn't true, when somebody says something that's not the way the world really is. If someone makes a claim that's false but she

thinks it's true, we call that a mistake. People make mistakes all the time, and we try to correct them. But if a person says something that isn't true and he knows it's not true, we call that a lie, and lies, unlike honest mistakes, have a moral valence about them. They matter in a different way.

Children learn about lying early on in life too. "Janie, did you take the last cookie on that plate when I told you not to?" "No." "Then why are there crumbs on your shirt?" "Joey, did you hit your sister?" "I didn't do it." "Then why is she crying, and why does she say that you did?"

The temptation to lie, to avoid or deny the truth, first arises when we're afraid of what might happen if we told the truth. It's such a common tendency that it turns up in the very beginning of the Bible. It starts with simple evasion. God comes looking for Adam in the Garden of Eden, when for the first time Adam feels that he needs to hide from God. "Who told you that you were naked?" God asks. "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" And right then and there, Adam invents evasion and tries to pass the buck. "The woman you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." It's her fault. What could I do?

We're only three chapters into the Bible, right after the creation of the whole world, and already humankind is trying to hide from the truth. In the very next chapter, Adam and Eve's son Cain is jealous of his brother Abel, so he kills him. Again, God comes looking. "Where is your brother Abel?" Now Cain answers with an outright lie, and a twist of cynicism. "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

Genesis says that, from the earliest days, when human beings have done things we shouldn't do and want to

avoid the consequences, or when the way things really are is more than we want to deal with, our temptation has always been to abandon the truth.

The habit has become so widespread in our time that there are people who claim we live in a “post-truth” world, that there’s no such thing as truth. There are only opinions and points of view. But of course that’s nonsense. Nobody really lives that way. We take a thousand things for granted as being true every day. If we didn’t, we could never get out of bed, or feed ourselves, or do our work, or enjoy our hobbies, or have any kind of relationship with another person. The claim that there’s no such thing as truth is a kind of untethered skepticism that radically overstates another truth: namely, that some questions are matters of opinion rather than fact, and sometimes even the facts of a situation can be hard to determine.

Some questions *are* matters of opinion, of course: What’s your favorite salad dressing, or style of music, or sport to watch? Those are all just personal preferences. Some questions are matters of judgment, where reasonable people can disagree: Who’s the best pitcher in baseball? Is this a good novel, or poem, or work of art?

But to say that some things are matters of opinion is not to say that *everything* is just a matter of opinion. If a child learning his numbers says two plus two equals five, you’d correct him because he made a mistake, and you’d want him to learn the way things really are so that he can get along in the world. Two plus two is four, not five. That’s just a fact, and people need to know facts in order to thrive as individuals, and for society as a whole to function.

Let's do a little thought experiment. Suppose a few people got together and formed the Green Cheese Society. Their claim is that the moon is made of green cheese, and they're quite serious about it. What would you say? My guess is that you'd say, "But it isn't. The moon is made up of rocks and other materials, but it's not made of green cheese." "How do you know?" the Green Cheese Society asks. "Well, astronauts have landed on the moon, and they've walked around, and they've brought back samples of rocks, but no cheese. Astronomers can test the makeup of moons and planets in other ways, too, and there's just no plausible theory to support your idea."

Now suppose the Green Cheese Society members said, "Well, everyone is entitled to their own opinion." What would you make of that? What does it mean to say that people are entitled to their own opinion? If we mean that people are free to believe whatever they want to believe, as long as they don't harm anyone else, we might go along with that, even if we think some beliefs are pretty strange. But if we mean that every opinion is equally valid, just because somebody believes it, who really thinks that's true? Who seriously thinks the moon could be made of green cheese, or that two plus two equals five?

The point is that some things are matters of fact, and some are matters of opinion, and it's important to know which are which. In questions that really are matters of opinion, people might argue one way or another, but most of us recognize that we can legitimately have all sorts of opinions. Matters of fact are different, though. If somebody claimed that two plus two equals five and they're entitled to their opinion, we'd say their opinion is simply mistaken. It's wrong. Two plus two is four, not five, and that's just a fact. The moon isn't made of green cheese either, and that's a

fact, too, though it's the kind of fact we believe because we have reliable ways of answering such questions, and we trust people who have skills in certain areas and have no reason not to tell us the truth.

The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan is quoted a lot these days for his saying that people are entitled to their own opinions, but not their own facts. He was not the first person to say that, but his point is an extremely important one. Some questions are matters of opinion, and some are matters of fact, and it's important in our personal lives and in our life as a society not to confuse the two.

It's been said that the first casualty of war is the truth. Armies and peoples at war have a way of exaggerating their own virtues and victories as well as their enemies' vices and defeats. A similar dynamic plays out any time two or more individuals or parties or tribes are on opposite sides of some issue. People tend to exaggerate their own virtues and their opponents' vices, and their commitment to the truth tends to be limited to whatever suits their other interests.

I was on the jury of a murder trial several years ago, and I heard people on the witness stand swear to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," then proceed to say things that were manifestly untrue. If you commit a serious crime and want to avoid the consequences, the last thing you care about is telling the truth. I've heard people sit in my office and rationalize all sorts of bad behavior, for essentially the same reason: acknowledging the truth would mean they would have to confess some things, and change their ways. They'd rather go on living a lie than have to come clean, and make amends, and do some things differently.

As a philosophy major in college I read Aristotle and other philosophers who said that humankind is the rational animal, and the ability to search for truth is a uniquely human characteristic, and a noble quest that any rational person ought to pursue. That may be true, but in the forty years since I left college and divinity school, I've noticed that lots of people seem to be interested in the truth only as far as it suits their other interests. If the truth might interfere with something else they want, or carry consequences they'd rather not face, then truth becomes the first casualty of interest or desire.

But that's a profoundly unchristian attitude. Christians who take our faith seriously have to be committed to the truth, since we serve a Savior who says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." It was Pontius Pilate who, confronted with the unpleasant choice of having to decide between putting an innocent man to death or resisting an angry crowd that could cause him no end of trouble, decided to do the easier thing and sacrifice the innocent man. In that situation, Pilate cynically asked, "What is truth?" He knew enough of the truth to suspect that self-interest was leading him do something that might turn out to be terribly wrong. What he didn't know was that, from a Christian perspective, he was, in some deeply spiritual sense, quite literally handing the Truth over to be crucified.

If anyone in this world has a commitment to the truth, it ought to be we who call ourselves Christians. And we need to be committed to the truth even when it's hard to hear; even when it calls into question some of our short-term self-interests; even when it challenges some of the assumptions and priorities of whatever other tribe we happen to belong to.

It feels like an odd thing to offer a sermon saying that we should all be committed to finding and following the truth—as if that wasn't so self-evident that it doesn't need to be said. But we live in a time when some people say there's no such thing as truth, and others can't seem to distinguish facts from opinions, and a great many people are only interested in the truth to the extent that it suits their other interests.

Even people who think the truth is important sometimes throw up their hands and say it's so hard to know what's true that they've given up trying to figure it out. But that's not good enough. Those of us who claim to follow Jesus can never give up, because Jesus calls us to be witnesses to the truth. Our personal relationships depend on truthfulness, and the vitality and integrity of our country and the peace and security of the world depend upon our commitment to knowing what's true and doing what's right.

And, of course, the state of our souls depends entirely upon the truth, too. As Jesus himself reminds us, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org