

The Truth and Freedom

John 8:31-36

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

September 13, 2020

Last Sunday I preached a sermon titled, “Seeing Jesus Again – for the First Time,” which could serve as the title of this series of sermons.

I believe that liberal Christians have forfeited Jesus, yielding him to other expressions of the faith that we might not be comfortable with. I had been thinking about that for a while when I ran across the statement about Jesus by Leonard Cohen, the statement I read last week. Cohen said that “the figure of the man has touched me.” Any man who says, “Blessed are the poor” and who hangs out with “thieves, prostitutes and the homeless” has got to be a person of “unparalleled generosity and insight and madness.”

You might think that those public sentiments would be commonplace among progressive Christians. That is our bailiwick, right. But I read that, and I thought, “You don’t hear liberal Christians talk about Jesus the way the Jewish poet did, with such open and sincere admiration.”

Maybe we are put off by the romanticized picture of Jesus we grew up with or maybe we can’t buy the theology we were taught, and we don’t know what to replace it with. Whatever the reason, I decided it was time to get reacquainted with Jesus.

In this series of sermons I will focus our attention on the words and acts of Jesus, some well-known, like the ones we will consider today, some not so well-known. All intended to re-introduce us to Jesus of Nazareth, the One we follow, the One whose name we bear, the One in whose name we gather.

(Reading of John 8:31-35)

“You will know the truth and the truth will make you free,” said Jesus. Writer Richard Rohr agreed but added, “Before the truth sets you free, it tends to make you miserable.”

Flannery O’Connor said famously, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd,” an interpretation that seems tailor-made for our day, which some are calling a post-truth age, what with its non-denial denials, alternate facts, truthiness, and confirmation bias.

In the last presidential campaign, the political pandemic of 2016, I wrote two pieces about truth. One was titled, “How to mislead people without actually lying;” the other was titled, “Lies, damned lies and campaign rhetoric.”

Just so you know, we’re not the first generation to struggle to get to the truth in a highly politicized environment. There is a non-canonical gospel called the Gospel of Nicodemus. It dates from possibly the third century. You may be surprised that people were still writing Gospels a hundred years after the last Gospel in the New Testament, Gospel of John, was written. Christians didn’t stop writing gospels when they got four. Who knew Gospels were going to be capped at four?

The Gospel of Nicodemus is clearly a fictional piece. But it is all the more interesting because it is fictional. The author imagines how stories could have ended

instead of the way they ended in the four Gospels. Take for example, Jesus' interrogation by Pontius Pilate.

Jesus says, "For this purpose I came: to bear witness to the truth."

Pilate responds, "What is truth?"

The canonical Gospels stop there. End of story. We assume that Pilate wheeled and left the room. The Gospel of Nicodemus imagines that the conversation continued.

Jesus says, "Truth is from heaven," to which Pilate counters, "Therefore truth is not on earth."

Jesus replies, "Truth is on earth among those, who when they have the power of judgment, are governed by truth, and form right judgment." (3:11-14)

You can find truth on earth, Jesus said, according to the Gospel of Nicodemus, wherever you find people in positions of power rendering "right judgments" based on the truth.

Evidently, there were people in the third century who wondered where in the halls of power you could find truth.

"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Sounds easy enough. The trick, of course, is knowing the truth, sorting out the truth from the myriad versions we hear every day.

Jesus seems to have been aware of something else that prevents us from knowing the truth. He was talking to some new followers. They were Jews, which was hardly unusual – almost all his followers were Jews. They were puzzled when he said that they would be freed by the truth. They evidently understood him in a historical sense. "We have never been slaves," they said.

Jesus wasn't thinking in a historical sense. He told them that what was keeping them from the truth and thus preventing them from being free was what he called generically sin.

I don't know exactly what he meant by that, but here's my take.

At no point in our search for truth do we cease to be flawed human beings, complete with a full array of insecurities, fears, biases and prejudices, all of which influence where we look for the truth, who we listen to, what we read, which network we watch, what sounds reasonable and the conclusions we reach.

That is true even when we go to the Bible for spiritual insight or guidance. Indeed, that may be when we are most dangerously sinful. For we assume that because we are about a holy task, interpreting a holy book, that our moral and spiritual slate has been magically wiped clean. Our soul is a tabula rosa on which the truth can be written. The result is that we believe that our conclusions have come straight from God's mouth to our ears.

Let me give you an example of what I am talking about.

I grew up, as many of you did, in a racially segregated society. Segregation was supported, given theological justification, Sunday after Sunday by preachers who appealed to the Bible. How on earth could you appeal to the Bible for support for segregation, you ask. A little creative hermeneutics was required. One of the more curious proof-texts was Leviticus 19:19, which says, You shall not "put on a garment made of two materials." You didn't know that polyester and cotton blend you're wearing is an abomination before God, did you? Actually, Deuteronomy (22:11) clarifies that it is the interweaving of wool and linen that is prohibited.

What does that have to do with keeping races separate? Nothing I can think of. But evidently some preacher ran across the law that said you shouldn't wear clothes made of two fabrics and thought, "That means we should have segregated schools!" Obviously, the preachers believed in segregation for reasons that had nothing to do with the Bible. What they preached is what the scripture looks like when it is run through the filter of racial prejudice.

My point is that we do not cease to be flawed human beings even when we search for the truth.

I think that may be why Jesus added a qualifier to his statement about truth and freedom: "*If you continue in my word . . . you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*" If you allow your way of perceiving the world and being in the world to be transformed by his perception of the world and his way of being in the world, as I said last week; if you "have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5); if you are shaped by his values and his character and his spirit, as well as by his words -- then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free, free from the darkness of error, intentional or otherwise; free from deceptions and deceits, political and otherwise -- free indeed.

But then we will be faced with a question: What is our responsibility to the truth we now know?

I recently came across one of the most stunning statements about the truth I have ever read. It is from a book by Leo Tolstoy.

“. . . you can always keep from lying to yourself and to (others), and you are not only able, but must do so, because in this alone, in the liberation of oneself from the lie and in the profession of the truth, does the only good of your life consist. . . There is one, only one thing in which you are free and almighty in your life — everything else is beyond your power. This thing is, to recognize the truth and to profess it.” (Leo Tolstoy, 1893, The Kingdom of God is Within You)

The truth, Tolstoy said, is not something to be possessed; it is something to be professed. "We cannot do anything against the truth," Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians, "but only for the truth." (I Corinthians 13:8-9)

Isaiah lamented in his day, as we lament in ours, "Justice is turned back and righteousness stands at a distance: for truth stumbles in the marketplace, and righteousness cannot enter." (Isaiah 59:14-15)

"Fight to the death for truth," says an ancient Jewish writing, ". . . and the Lord God will fight for you." (Wisdom of ben Sirach 4:25, 28)

That is our responsibility to the truth that has set us free.

In the name of the One who is the way, the truth, and the life. Amen.

Benediction

From the mystery of God we come,
To the mystery of God we go,
And the coming and the going,
And everything in between,
Is gracious gift.