

“Freeing Truth”

“What is truth?” Pilate asked when told by Jesus, ***“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.”*** We preachers tend to skip over that question as the prattling of an avowed agnostic and skeptic. Yet Pilate’s question has a deep, philosophical cast to it that we ought not ignore. In part, because Jesus talks about truth repeatedly in the Gospel of John, including today’s Gospel reading. We hear Jesus say, “. . . ***you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.***” So, maybe we better know the answer to the question, ***“What is truth?”*** especially if our freedom is somehow at issue.

Here are three statements about me; two are true, one is false. I lettered in track for my high school. I recently have lost twelve pounds. One of my favorite movies of all time is “Hunt for Red October.” The second statement is false, as much as I might wish it were true.

Linguistic analysts will tell you that what makes those statements valuable is that they are falsifiable, that is, you can explain how to measure whether they are true or false. Statement 2 would require a scale and some indication of my weight, say, several weeks ago, like when I last visited my doctor and his nurse weighed me in. Statement 1 would require gaining access to the records from the Athletic Department at Weymouth High School in Massachusetts and determining if my name shows up in those records between 1964 and 1967. Statement 3 would be more difficult, but you could ask my wife, my kids, and my closest friends what movie I never stop talking about, or which one I turn to whenever it shows up on TV. Okay, so much for the language of truth.

Almost every day in the Plain Dealer throughout this election season (by the way, remember to vote next Tuesday, if you have not already mailed in your ballot) has appeared a column with the heading *PolitiFact Ohio*, part of a nationwide effort to measure the truth of candidate’s or other political entities’ comments and claims. Claims are assessed as True, Mostly True, Half True, Barely True, False, and all the way over to Pants

on Fire False.

Apparently, both parties and all candidates seem to have a hard time distinguishing between truth and falsehood. While some statements are rated as True or Mostly True, most fall in the false end of the spectrum. When a statement is deemed to be Pants on Fire False, you have to wonder about the person who made the statement — that person's lack of values, judgment, and intelligence come into play.

Facts, true or false, do not seem to weigh in on how politicians think the electorate will decide. My guess is that facts mean very little — it's opinions that matter. I can trot out fact after fact after fact about this candidate or that issue, but in the end people decide more or less on gut instincts. Hence the saying, *“Don't confuse me with facts, my mind's made up.”*

Opinions, unlike facts, cannot be true or false — they can be ill-formed or well-reasoned, they may be strongly-held or barely-believed, they may shape your thinking or not — but they are your opinions. We all know that everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion (by the way, I don't always need to know your own opinion; sometimes you can just keep it as your own).

Some truths take on importance in our lives. The truth that Muslim extremists flew two jets into the twin towers of the World Trade Center is a truth that has had impact for more than two decades. The truth that I got a hangnail last week, while perhaps irksome to me, has little profound effect on you. The truth that Napoleon lost at the battle of Waterloo is probably very significant in the ensuing shape of global politics, but knowing that fact today probably doesn't change your life much (unless, of course, it comes up on the history exam on Tuesday).

So, what is this truth that sets you free that Jesus is talking about? To get a grasp on this we need to step back quite a bit — back, in fact, to the Garden of Eden. There Satan, in the form of a serpent, asked Eve: ***“Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?”***

That's a question about truth. On the first level, Eve has to either acknowledge or deny that God said something about trees and eating. He had. She heard it. She knows that to be true. "***We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden,***" she admits, "***but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'***" That second part is mostly true; God had said most of that, except that God had not mentioned anything about "touching." Eve tacks that on.

Now, Satan wants to change the truth. Only he does not challenge whether or not God said what God said, but rather whether or not God meant what God said. "***You will not die,***" he tells Eve, "***for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.***" Now truth is made into falsehood — God said it, that's true! But Satan wants Eve to reject that truth, and to accept his interpretation of its meaning. This is precisely what Eve does — in part because we already see her leaning away from the validity of God's truth (can't touch? That's not fair!)

Ever since then, we humans have been on a quest for the truth. Cast out from the garden, Adam and Eve don't question how they came to be where they were (they knew that well enough), they question how to get back. As Pastor Duane Steele has written, "*Someone once remarked that philosophy seeks the truth, theology finds it, and religion possesses it. This may be so, but if it is, it's because acceptance of the real truth relies solely on faith.*"

Here are the truths that Adam and Eve had to embrace: they messed up; God meant exactly what He said; Satan is a liar (Jesus says just that, in fact that Satan is "***the father of lies***"). What they may have missed (and I don't have them to speak to, so I have to guess): God still loved them.

We see that in the fact that they did not die (although death became the certainty of all in existence). We see it in God's fashioning some skin garments to replace their feeble fig leaf attire. And we see it in what is called the *proto-evangel*; God declares,

***“I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.”***

Many scholars take this to be the first hint at a Messiah, someone who would come and squash Satan.

So today we hear Jesus expand on that declaration: ***“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”*** That hinted-at Messiah is Jesus. Some will label that an opinion; others will call it a wish; but those who continue in His Word come to know it as truth.

“Now hold on a minute,” someone may say, *“either something is true or it isn’t.”* I concur; but not every truth is believed. There are still some people who believe the world is flat. There are lots of people who believe the moonwalks were all faked. And I am sure that many of us have had experience of being on the highway with people who seem to believe that the laws of physics regarding bodies in motion do not apply to them.

Apparently, we need to take both the flat-earthers and the moon-lading-disbelievers for a ride on the space shuttle — yet even that may not convince them. The laws-of-physics deniers will discover at some point that pushing a vehicle at 90 m.p.h. through traffic on I-271 will mean that they cannot stop that body in motion in time to prevent it from becoming a body at much-to-quickly-arrived-at-rest (we just pray that no one else has to learn that lesson with them).

Jesus is teaching those ***“Jews who had believed in him”*** that, while experience may be a good teacher, it is not the best. His Word is the best teacher. Okay, we can talk about experiencing the Word — indeed that is what Jesus is saying. ***“If you continue in my word . . .”*** is an invitation to become immersed in the Word of Jesus. I would translate it, *“If you take up residence in my word . . .”* That Greek word means much more than just having the Word as a touchstone AND it is in the plural, telling us that being immersed in the Word is not to be a private venture, but a

corporate activity.

And just what does being immersed, taking up residence in Jesus' Word accomplish? It makes us disciples. That's a word we kind of gloss over. We sometimes apply it solely to those twelve who are named in the Bible as Jesus' followers. Or we generically let it mean anyone who belongs to a church. But a disciple is one who is learning a discipline, who is devoting his or her life to learning from a master all that master has to teach. Discipleship is a life-long process.

Jesus tells us that, in addition to being His disciples, we will come to know the truth. We are now back with Pilate in the judgment hall asking, "***What is truth?***" I am certainly not the first to point this out, but it needs to be pointed out — as Pilate asks that question, the Truth is standing right before him. Jesus declared, "***I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.***" That is a rather exclusive claim. It does tend to deny the notion that all faiths lead to same final destination. No, it doesn't tend to deny that: it expressly rules out any path to the Father apart from Jesus.

Knowing that, Jesus tells us "***will make you free.***" Robert Farrar Capon writes: "*If we are ever to enter fully into the glorious liberty of the [children] of God, we are going to have to spend more time thinking about freedom than we do. The church, by and large, has had a poor record of encouraging freedom. She has spent so much time inculcating in us the fear of making mistakes that she had made us like ill-taught piano students; we play our songs, but we never really hear them, because our main concern is not to make music, but to avoid some flub that will get us in dutch. She has been so afraid we will loose sight of the laws of our nature, that she made us care more about how we look than about who we are; made us act more like the subjects of a police state than fellow citizens of the saints.*"

So what is it that we are to free to do? Live any way we want? No, you can't do that and be a disciple. Jesus wants us to live free from the fear of sin's destruction. We go back to Garden once again, "***. . . the day that***

you eat of it you shall die.” Yet God in grace did not have them die in that day.

We may never be free from the fear of sin’s disruptions: all the consequences that come because of our foolish, self-centered, ill-informed, world-absorbed, greed-induced choices and behaviors. We will suffer consequences; Murphy’s Law, if nothing else, will see to that!

What we are freed from is the destruction of sin. Listen to Jesus: ***“Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”*** That’s the deal. Sin is a self-perpetuating cycle, and you cannot break the cycle. Consequently . . . ***“The slave does not have a permanent place in the household . . .”*** If that was all there was to the reality, then reality really does suck. Left to ourselves, sin would eventually lead us into nowhere.

But ***“. . . the son has a place there forever.”*** How nice for Him, we may think. And if this Son were to act as we do, then it would be nice just for Him. But He does not act thus. He shares with us the life He has in Him. ***“So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”*** Free from fear of sin, death, and the Devil (Luther called that “the unholy trinity”). Free from the thoughts, judgments, and opinions of others

Terry Wardle has written extensively about his experience with depression, agoraphobia, and deep wounding — and is up front to say, *“Nobody can ‘get’ me on any of that, because that’s the very place where Jesus met me and set me free.”* Free now to say that he continues on the journey to wellness. As he puts it, *“I have been healed. I am being healed. I will be healed.”* God is now using him in that freedom to touch and teach many who have gone through the same deep troughs as did he and bring them to healing in Jesus.

This is the freeing truth: We are sinners, yet sinners set free from the eternal consequences of that sin in the death and resurrection of Christ. We are now forgiven sinners, who still bear the marks of the wounds that life has throughout the past, and continues inflict on us. Those wounds often leave us limping and crawling through life emotionally, spiritually,

relationally. Jesus wants us to know the full freedom of His presence with us, and would use us to bring healing love to work in others. That's the truth that sets us free.

Or perhaps I should say, *“I have been set free to serve. I am being set free to serve. I will be set free to serve.”*

Amen.