

Sermon for Zion - August 16, 2020 – The Letters of John part 6

Hymns: 328 - This Is My Father's World; 625 - Seek Ye First;
651 – Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer

Scripture: 2 John 1-6

Sermon Title: “Walking in Truth and Love”

2 John 1-6

The elder,

To the lady chosen by God and to her children, whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who know the truth—because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love.

It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

What has happened to the truth? Where did it go? When did personal opinion, no matter how ill-conceived or thinly based, become a substitute for truth? When was truth downgraded from “the truth” to “your truth, my truth?” When did lying, unashamedly and repeatedly, become acceptable behavior for social and political leaders? When did yelling any kind of half-backed, half-wit theory loudly and repeatedly become a substitute for careful, reasoned investigation?

Tracing it back, the downgrading of truth got a major recent boost with the cult of personality we call Celebrity, and particularly celebrity endorsements, opinions voiced on TV or YouTube channels by those known as “influencers.” Perhaps the most notable of these is a woman named Jenny McCarthy, whose science and education credentials include being named Playmate of the Year, starring in such notable films as “Scream 3” and “Santa Baby,” and hosting a dating game show on MTV.

Tragically, her own son's condition of autism coincided with a paper published in the medical journal “Lancet” by Andrew Jeremy Wakefield, a now discredited British ex-physician best known for a fraudulent 1998 study that falsely claimed a link between the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism. The

British General Medical Council found that Wakefield “had been dishonest in his research, had acted against his patients' best interests and mistreated developmentally delayed children.” The British Medical Journal described Wakefield's work as an “elaborate fraud”. Wakefield's study and his claim that the MMR vaccine might cause autism, aided by Jenny McCarthy’s support of his false and disproven theories on American TV programs such as “Oprah” and “The View,” led to a decline in vaccination rates in the United States and elsewhere, and a corresponding rise in measles and mumps infections, resulting in serious illness and even deaths – 140,000 worldwide in 2019, representing a dramatic increase - as well as contributing to a climate of distrust of all vaccines and the re-emergence of other previously-controlled diseases.

It is also entirely likely that, combined with a US Head of State for whom Truth is a moving and seldom-hit target, Jenny McCarthy and Andrew Wakefield may be significantly responsible for the bafflingly large number of people who proclaim the Corona-19 virus to be a “hoax,” and disregard proper precautions regarding gathering in large numbers, etc. This, despite over 20 million identified cases and three-quarters of a million confirmed deaths worldwide. That’s quite a hoax. Playing with the truth can be deadly.

So again: What has happened to the truth? Where did it go? When did personal opinion become a substitute for truth? When was truth downgraded from “the truth” to “your truth, my truth?”

Maybe we need to go back a little bit further than YouTube conspiracy theories. Maybe all the way back to Pontius Pilate. When interrogating Jesus, Pilate famously asked, “What is truth?” What is somewhat less well-known is what Jesus said to prompt Pilate’s question: “For this reason I was born,” said Jesus, “and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

It turns out that Jesus talks quite a bit about Truth. The Gospel and Letters of John preserve many of these statements – so much so that one of John’s names for Jesus is, “The Truth.” As in:

The Word (that is, Jesus) became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the

Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14) ...grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (1:17).

Jesus used this same title for himself, when he said (John 14:6, 8:31-32), *“I am the way and the truth and the life ... If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* “The truth shall set you free” is a different thing entirely from the current popular concept of, “I am free to make my own truth.” That doesn’t set you free. That binds you to all kinds of error, misdirection, and even death.

Truth is important. I remember having a New Testament in the 1970s, called “The Truth.” That’s a good name for the Gospels. That’s what Paul, Peter and James called it. They used the phrase “The Truth” as a catchphrase for the whole Christian message of both the story of Jesus’ life and his teaching, as when Paul writes (Ephesians 1:13): *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.* James and Peter use similar language (James 5:19 1 Peter 1:22).

Those first Christians staked not only their faith but their lives on the knowledge that what Jesus said and did – that who Jesus was – was true. Was, in fact, truth itself. And why did they do that? Because they experienced Jesus directly. They knew him. They spent time with him. They listened, they watched, they walked the path with him. And everything about Jesus – everything he said and did and exemplified – told them he was Truth itself. And they recorded and presented what Jesus said and did and exemplified in what we call the Gospels and the writings of the New Testament, so that we would know it too.

But how do we, two thousand years later, know whether the Gospels themselves are true? How do we know the picture of Jesus they paint can be trusted?

Well, one way to test the truth is to investigate the veracity or reliability of the source. It turns out that any archaeological or geographic test to which we can put the Gospels verifies their authenticity. I have led hundreds of people – parishioners, university students and teachers, clergy, church leaders – on archaeological and biblical study tours of the Holy Land. Whenever the Gospels refer to a location, there it is – down to the smallest descriptive detail. In terms of archaeology and geography, two of the best tools we have to reach that far back in time, the Gospels are unerringly accurate. So much so, that when the chief archaeologist of the City of

Jerusalem for 25 years, Professor Dan Bahat, was asked how they uncovered so many Biblical sites in and around Jerusalem, he answered, “We used the Gospels as our guide. Where they said something was, there we would dig, and there it would be.”

The Gospels were written either by eyewitnesses themselves, or by those, as Luke states right up front in introducing his Gospel, who relied on first-hand eyewitness testimony. And the geography and archaeology backs that up, with more finds coming to light regularly. The eyewitness aspect of the New Testament writings is vital to what they are and why they exist – as a reliable and true testimony to who Jesus was, what Jesus said, and what Jesus did. The Letters of John upon which this current sermon series is based makes no bones about this. Listen (1 John 1:1-5):

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life... We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard... This is the message we have heard from Jesus and declare to you.

But archaeology, geography and eyewitness testimony aside – and that’s an awful lot to put aside - what speaks to me most strongly about the truth of the message of the New Testament is its binding together of Truth and Love. That the truth of the Gospel is made manifest, made real, in love. That the character of Jesus was most clearly revealed in Jesus’ words and teaching and acting in and with love. Truth and love, in the life and teaching of Jesus and witness of the New Testament, become indivisible. They become One.

So much so, love becomes the measuring stick of true belief. How do you identify a follower of the truth? Here’s what Jesus said (John 13:34-35) “*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*”

Jesus’ friend Peter carried that message forward (1 Peter 1:22) “*Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.*”

And John, in these letters, makes it his constant theme (1 John 3:18-19):
Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence.

What John is doing, what Peter affirmed, and what Jesus began, is to make “truth” and “love” interchangeable. If we are walking in the truth, that will lead us to love, and will be made evident in loving actions. If we are walking in love, our path will inevitably lead us to truth. Or, as John writes in the letter we read today, called 2 John:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, will be with us in truth and love.

It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. And now I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

To walk in the truth is to walk in love. To walk in love is to walk in the truth. How do we know that the Jesus of the New Testament is the true Jesus? Because everywhere Jesus walked, his feet brought him to places and to people who needed, and who received from Jesus, love. Everything Jesus said, centred on love. Everything Jesus did, revealed love. Every person Jesus touched, received love. Even the unspeakably horrible death which Jesus died, was for love – the love of God for the whole world. And as Jesus said, on the night of his arrest (John 15:12-14): *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. And my command is to love each other as I have loved you.*

This is not the foundation of a lie. This is truth itself. Read what Jesus said about loving your neighbour, helping the poor, welcoming the outcast, rejecting prejudice, forgiving one another, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, rejecting violence, and ask yourself, does this sound as though it is based on truth, or an elaborate lie?

John is writing these letters because there were those within the churches for which he had responsibility who were playing fast and loose with the truth. Abandoning the truth of the Gospel, the true Jesus, they were amending the teaching of Jesus to accord with their own agendas – personal freedom, status, power, sexual

license, comfort, wealth, conformity with the standards of the world. In order to justify these actions, they stepped away from the truth, and, fitting in quite well with today's world, were reinventing Jesus, were relegating Jesus to "an inspiring figure" rather than recognising him as Lord and Saviour, as Son of God. Once you make Christianity a "religion among religions," once you downgrade Jesus to "misunderstood Messiah figure," once you make following Jesus a philosophy rather than a relationship of servant to Lord, you have made both Jesus and the Christian faith subject to yourself, rather than yourself subject to God. You have placed yourself above the Gospel. You have made yourself an idol. A false god.

And so Jesus' friend and follower John writes his congregation – us - and commends her for her children – you, me – who are walking in the truth. And to remind her – and us – of what it means to walk in the Truth – the real Truth – he writes this:

It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. And now, dear lady (John refers to his congregations as "dear lady"), I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

And so, fellow children of the truth, ask yourself, "Am I walking in the truth?" And to answer, simply ask yourself this: "Am I walking in love? In love of God and love of neighbour? Is that where my feet, my hands, my heart lead me? Am I following Jesus? Or am I following the world, my own agenda, a truth of my own making?"

Pilate asked, "What is truth?" And yet, there stood Truth, right in front of his very eyes. There stood Jesus, the Grace and Truth of God made flesh. This same Jesus stands before us. Recognise him for who he is, and follow him. And you shall walk in the Truth. And the Truth shall set you free. Amen.