

“Practicing Pentecost: After Truth”
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John 18:33-38

In today’s gospel lesson we find two men talking about truth. One is a Roman, the other is a Galilean. Pilate doesn’t seem to understand what Jesus is saying, partly because Pilate is a Roman. But, mostly, I suspect, because Jesus is not only talking about truth but is claiming to be an authentic witness to the truth. The last line of today’s reading has Jesus saying, “For this I was born, for this I came into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.” The reading ended there, but the next line, verse 38, Pilate responds to Jesus with a question, a question for the ages. “What is truth?”

There is a line attributed to the 16th century philosopher Francis Bacon: “What is truth, said jesting Pilate, and would not wait for an answer.” Bacon was a brilliant philosopher, but I have my doubts that Pilate was joking. Cynical maybe, weary, impatient, upset maybe. Probably more than anything else just plain confused. I don’t think he could understand what this young Galilean was talking about. For you see, Jesus talked about truth as if it was something you could do, as if truth was something you could be. For Pilate, that was nonsense. Pilate, who had a good classical education behind him, understood truth to be something you thought. Pilate’s truth was the truth of Aristotle, of Euclid, of Archimedes.

All human beings are mortal, Socrates is a human being, therefore, Socrates is mortal. True.
The interior angles of a triangle are together equal to two right angles. True.
A body displaces its own weight of any liquid in which it floats. True.

Oh, and there were subtler truths, slippery as an eel: It is expedient for one man to die for the people. Probably true. My point is simply this: truth, for Pilate, was a function of the intellect. It was a proposition, a concept, a calculation.

For Jesus, truth was a much bigger thing. He had not been brought up on Aristotle, Euclid or Archimedes, but on the Law, the Prophet and the Psalms. For Jesus, truth was not primarily something you thought but something you felt and did. Believing that he was bearing witness to God, truth was something Jesus thought he was, suggesting, of course, that truth is something we can be. In the bible, truth, *emeth* in Hebrew, *aletheia* in Greek, unlike Pilate’s truth, seldom ever refers to propositions or equations. It generally refers to persons, and usually refers to God. God is True. And when we focus on the gospels and letters that we read, not least in John’s Gospel, we find people described as “doing the truth,” we find Jesus described as “being the truth.” So, if we are going to be faithful to the Judeo-Christian tradition, if we hope to live as whole people with lives marked by congruity, we must understand **truth as something that is thought, that is felt, that is done.**

Several years ago, I heard about an older English couple who had never flown before, until they decided to visit their grandchildren in New York City. They were flying on a DC 10, which is an enormous jet with three engines. Half way out over the Atlantic, a voice comes over the intercom: “Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking. I in no way want to alarm you, but we have lost power in one of our three engines. However, there is no cause for the slightest worry, this plane is equipped to fly on the thrust of two engines. We will, however, be one hour

late in arriving at JFK airport.” Ten minutes later, and with the terrifying calm that pilots reserve for circumstances of extreme danger: “Ladies and gentlemen, your Captain speaking. We have, in fact, lost power in a second engine. I want you to know that it is perfectly possible to stay airborne on the thrust of a single engine. We have notified New York of our difficulty, and we have every reason to believe we will make a safe and normal landing. However, we will be five hours late in arriving at JFK.” Grandpa turns to grandma with a hint of irritation in his voice and says, “My dear, if that third engine goes, we will be up here all night.”

It is a silly story, but one that illustrates the point I want to make. We are designed to operate best on the thrust of three engine—truth thought, truth felt, truth done. And, indeed, when these three engines thrust together, when there is harmony between what we are thinking and feeling and doing, we fly with wings like eagles. But you know what can happen: “Ladies and gentlemen, we regret to inform you that one of your engines has stalled, or maybe two? Yes, it is risky to try to stay airborne on the powerful engine of our intellect alone—truth thought. But it is just as risky to try to fly with only the engine of the emotion—truth felt. Each of us holds to important beliefs and convictions that through the years have helped shape who we are, and hold them we must. But if we are trying to fly our faith on conviction alone, and if that engine stutters, we wouldn’t be up there all night, we may be sunk. I know people who try to keep their life and faith airborne on the engine of the will. With sheer determination, they do what is right regardless of what seems natural, regardless of what science has proven to be true. Doing the truth? Yes, by all means, it is so important that we do what is right! But, if our hearts are not in it, if we have little compassion, and if it flies in the face of common sense, well, at best we become good Pharisees or maybe vigilantes.

To practice Pentecost after we discover the truth about truth is to work at keeping all three engines thrusting—truth thought, truth felt, truth done. Otherwise, we risk being lop sided, out of balance, and in time irrelevant. Oh, we can help each other with this, you know. In fact, this is a primary reason for us to be here, participating in a faith community, to lovingly hold each other accountable with encouraging words and gestures of support.

Listen, I’ll tell you a story and then I’m done. Once upon a time there was a very shy boy who came upon the conclusion that he would need to learn how to dance. He decided that before he exposed himself to the embarrassment of doing it publicly, he would first master the art in secret. So, he bought himself a little book entitled, “Teach Yourself to Dance.” It contained detailed instructions and diagrams; these were the days when dances actually had steps to them. He mastered that book; he knew it cover to cover. Intellectually, he had it all up here. He even tried to practice what he had learned. He practiced in his bedroom behind a locked door in front of a mirror with a pillow as a partner. He put his feet in the right places; honestly, he had studied the book. But what he saw in the mirror was not reassuring. He was doing it right, but it was all quite graceless. And then, one night a girl who knew of his difficulty said to him, “Come on, let’s do it together, try it with me.” And to begin with he felt even more awkward than usual because she was so graceful and he was so clumsy. And then little by little he began to get the feel of it. All the book learning, all the diagrams for the first time began to make sense. He was experiencing grace, and it was beautiful.

You get the point don’t you? To practice Pentecost after knowing the truth about truth is to experience God’s grace, and it comes to us as gift. Of course, it helps if we know the truth

revealed in the Scriptures, and, of course, it is best to follow the diagrams. Are we not trying to follow in Christ's footsteps?

Do you ever feel clumsy and inadequate? Boy, I do. We can omit it: sometimes it is hard to get the feel of it. Until we remember that it's not meant to be a solo dance. Christ says to each of us, "Come on, I know your difficulties, let's do it together, try it with me."

"Dance, then, whoever you may be. I am the Lord of the Dance, says He. And He'll lead us on wherever we may be; He'll lead us all in the dance said He." Amen.