

Truth – the centre of Church life

John 18:28 - 40; 8:30-47; 14:1-8

Tim Stafford, in Christianity Today magazine shares this story. A pastor, Stepey Belynskyj, starts each confirmation class with a jar full of beans. He asks his students to guess how many beans are in the jar, and writes down their estimates. Then, next to those estimates, he helps them make another list: their favorite songs. When the lists are complete, he reveals the actual number of beans in the jar. The whole class looks over their guesses, to see which estimate was closest to being right.

Belynskyj then turns to the list of favorite songs. "And which one of these is closest to being right?" he asks. The students protest that there is no "right answer"; a person's favorite song is purely a matter of taste.

Belynskyj, who holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Notre Dame University, then asks, "When you decide what to believe in terms of your faith, is that more like guessing the number of beans, or more like choosing your favorite song?" Always, Belynskyj says, from old age as well as young, he gets the same answer: Choosing one's faith is more like choosing a favorite song.

Tim Stafford, of Christianity Today says, When Belynskyj told me this, it took my breath away. "After they say that, do you confirm them?" I asked him. "Well," smiled Belynskyj, "First I try to argue them out of it." (Tim Stafford, *CT*, September 14, 1992, p. 36)

Think about this. Choosing a favorite song is personal preference. It's not right or wrong. It might be in bad taste, inadequate theology, or a great tune, but it's not about being right. It's not equal to choosing one's faith. People can choose a faith or make up their own faith system, but that doesn't make it true. Guessing the number of beans in a jar, how-ever, is different. It's about accuracy, about reality, about truth.

In surveys, when interviewees are asked, "Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree some-what, or disagree strongly with the following statement: There is no such thing as absolute truth; different people can define truth in conflicting ways and still be correct."

The surveys all give a variety of responses so this one is not unusual. Only 28% of the respondents of one survey expressed strong belief in "absolute truth." More surprisingly, only 23 percent of born-again or evangelical Christians accepted this idea!

What a revelation! If more than 75 % of the followers of Christ say nothing can be known for certain, does this indicate, as it seems, that they are not convinced that Jesus existed, that He is who He claimed to be, that His Word is authentic, that God created the heavens and earth, or that eternal life awaits the believer? That's what the findings appear to mean.

If there is no absolute truth, then by definition nothing can be said to be absolutely true. To the majority of people, apparently it's all relative. Nothing is certain. Might be. Might not be. Who knows for sure? Take your guess & hope for the best! (Dobson, Dec 1991 letter, quoting Barna, What Americans Believe.)

We live in a day where alternative facts are popular. Trump's advisor, Kellyann Conway, popularized and scandalized the world with the term, "alternative facts." But this has been going for a long time in all sorts of areas of life. And it's not just an intellectual concern. It's a concern that affects science and politics and economic systems and affects our views on health with the number of people claiming that Covid-19 is a hoax. There are many things in this world we don't fully know or understand. But we at least need some kind of baseline so we can make intelligent decisions. But when we ignore evidence – even evidence that is counterdictory – we find ourselves in trouble.

This is no less true in the spiritual and moral realm. Polls shed light on the paradox of

increased religiosity and decreased morality. According to Canadian research, interest and attendance in Christian churches is declining. And more than likely many Canadian people say they agree that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious belief independent of any church or synagogue."

So the key to the paradox is the fact that those who claim to be Christians are arriving at faith on their own terms. Terms that make no demands on behavior. For example, a woman named Sheila, interviewed for Bellah's book, *Habits of the Heart*, embodies this attitude. "I believe in God," she said. "I can't remember the last time I went to church. But my faith has carried me a long way. It's 'Sheila-ism.' Just my own little voice." (C. Colson, *Against the Night*, 98.)

What the church is struggling with is a world as Allan Broom describes: He writes: "Openness - and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings - is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, slavery, persecutions, xenophobia, chauvinism and racism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all." C Colson *Against the Night*, 84

Allan makes some sense. The world has been a mess and is in a mess and if we judge history, the Creator's church and all the religions could have been more helpful. But if there is no standard of morality and truth, why should we strive to be right – to do right and – to follow the Almighty who points us to true faith? What is the right morality besides what each of us personally chooses? And furthermore, what standards do and will Canadians live by, if we don't follow some kind of common ethics and understanding? So the church has to do better

and be better and keep answering Pontius Pilot's question, "**What is truth?**"

What is truth? This question was raised by Pilate, when Jesus Christ stood trial before him, and exposed his own worldview. Pilate lived in a world in which absolute truth did not exist. Pilate's voice was dismissive and filled with disdain. We can imagine he sneered in mockery, angry that Christ dared to speak with truth. Though he looked straight into the face of the incarnate Truth, he could not discern it. Pilate was like so many today, a postmodernist, but one living in premodern times.

During the trial of Jesus, Governor Pilate interrogated Jesus about His kingdom. In His response, Jesus affirmed the spiritual nature of His kingdom and told Pilate, "Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." To which Pilate cynically answered, "What is truth?" [John 18:37-8] And that same ambivalence pervades our culture today. It is even common today for some to flatly deny the truth exists. But the denial of truth never extinguishes truth.

For example, "When England closed its Libyan Embassy, Muammar Qaddafi became so angry that he ordered England to be removed from all maps in Libya. If you buy a map in Libya today, you may find the area of England, will have been taken out, and is represented by a new section of the North Sea bordered by Scotland and Wales." (Stories for preachers and Teachers CD, V.1.01)

Look at Pilate's conduct during Jesus' trial. He tried to put responsibility on someone else. He tried to evade dealing with Jesus, but that's something no one can do. He tried to find a way to escape from the entanglement he faced. And he tried to work out a compromise – which didn't go the way he seemed to want it to go.

Lastly, I think we see in Pilate a sense of wistfulness. He met Jesus and saw something he was missing. But he caved in to the crowd, despite his wife's warning. Scripture tells us, "Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment

seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.'" (Matthew 28:19)

Pilate feared for his position so he questioned Jesus some more. "Where do you come from?" Pilate asked. In the end Pilate ironically gave Jesus the title that God gave, "Here is your king."

What is truth? It is defined as that which conforms with fact or reality. It is genuineness, veracity, or actuality. In a word, truth is reality. It is how things actually are. Theologically, truth is that which is consistent with the mind, will, character, glory, and being of Creator God. Truth is the self-disclosure of Almighty God Himself. It is what it is because God declares it so and made it so. All truth must be defined in terms of God, whose very nature is truth. We get into trouble when we try to define truth outside of the Almighty's terms.

One of the better known phrases in the Bible goes: "**The truth will set you free.**" We can't ignore the setting of when Jesus said it. He was in a debate with the religious leaders, about who he was and represented. John places this event right after Jesus confronted the men who brought the woman caught in adultery to him. So they were a little steamed toward him.

And it's important to know the context of this phrase. Jesus was offering assurance. "Even as he spoke, many believed in him. To the Jews who believed him, he said, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, & the truth will set you free.'" (Jo 8:31-32)

Jesus was in the middle of debating what true religion and faith is. It starts with belief in what Jesus says is true, including the love of God for us, that we are to love our neighbors, the terror of sin, as well as the meaning of life. It involves staying within the word of Jesus by

listening, learning, maturing deeper into Jesus' truth, obeying and loving our neighbors.

All this discipleship results in knowledge and right thinking and acting. Only this results in freedom. Freedom from fear. Freedom from our own selves. Freedom from other people's ideas, expectations & pressures. Plus freedom from sin. Jesus offers the whole package of shalom, wholeness, life, faith and peace. This is the truth the church needs to represent and promote and point to. But it's not just head knowledge about Jesus. It's about how we live and how we think.

Also, Jesus in a conversation with his disciples shared: "**I am the way and the truth and the life.** No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." With this combination of way, truth & life, we have a powerful summary of who Jesus is, what he is about, and why we should be his followers.

In contrast, polls find that "many adults reject the notions of original sin, the existence of Satan, and salvation by God's grace alone." Surveys also discover that "people tend to think that the core documents of the world's major faiths, such as the Bible, the Koran and the Book of Mormon, are 'different expressions of the same spiritual truth' and that praying to the dead can reap personal benefits." One could guess that many people believe that Jesus Christ sinned, instead of living a sinless life. (*Source Unknown*).

I ran across this interesting illustration that may demonstrate what society is like today – at least up to a point. Major Dalton shares: "It's time to work on that summer body. My wife and I recently tried out a new gym. A new Planet Fitness opened in our neighborhood and we thought we would check things out. During the sales pitch we kept hearing the same phrase frequently; "We are a judgment free zone."

“Planet Fitness prides itself on providing a judgment free fitness experience. A place where anyone at any level can come and begin their fitness journey. The phrase was printed on brochures featuring athletes with optimal bodies. It appeared in large letters above the weightlifting equipment where intimidating biceps were curling impressive amounts of weight. So while there may have been no judgment, there was a good deal of, shall we call it, personal self-critique.

“Thinking that maybe one day we could look like the person on the promotional material, Kim and I decided that we would give the center a try. The representative then produced a contract with a no commitment clause. Pause and think about that for a moment. We were assured that we could cancel anytime, and no matter what, nobody was going to judge us.

“As we placed initials and signatures on paper, we were presented with a document labeled “Terms and Conditions.” Printed on this digital document was a list of do’s and don’ts, what would be permitted and what would be impermissible. Actions which the company had “judged” to be inappropriate and inconsistent with corporate objectives and customer safety. Then it dawned on me, at Planet Fitness, judgment free does not mean rule free.

Dalton continues: “Can you imagine if it did? Someone decides they are going to sit idly on the last open bike while arguing loudly with their mom on their phone, but employees can’t say anything because it’s a “no judgment zone.” Another would-be gymnast decides they want to get buff in the buff, but all you can do is look away because it’s a “no judgment zone.” A fitness enthusiast decides he will publicly blast 80’s techno music through a JBL personal speaker system and you’re forced to listen because it’s a “no judgment zone.”

“Another person showers a machine in sweat and then moves on without cleaning it afterwards, but nobody can coach them on proper gym etiquette because it’s a “no judgment

zone.” And a 110 lb bodybuilder loads up 300 lbs of free-weights for a chest routine, but you can’t say anything because it’s a “no judgment zone.” And yes, I have actually witnessed some of the above. A lack of judgment is not a prerequisite for being judgment free.

“Scripture is clear. You and I as fallen human beings live in a “no judgment zone.” In this life, like our new gym, everyone is on their own spiritual fitness journey. Some are healthier than others. Some have been training for a long time. Others are just getting underway. We have no right to judge their spiritual appearance or journey. But “no judging” is not the same thing as “no rules.”

Today, many around us like to declare their freedom from critique. “Who are you to judge?” “What gives you the right to judge me?” “Judge not,” they quote, “lest you be judged.” But living in a judgment free zone does not give one the right to act wrong.

We live in a “no judgment zone.” But there are terms and conditions, rules put in place by God to ensure a safe & productive spiritual journey. It is not only permissible to graciously point out when these rules are being broken, it would be negligent to do otherwise. Because “judgment free” does not mean “rule free.”

This truth about life and Jesus – is important. In a way this illustration describes the church. It’s a challenge to be judgement free but keep pointing to and living by the Almighty’s rules. The world doesn’t like this and at times neither do we. But it’s the way to real freedom and truth.

Let’s close with this paraphrase by Ray Friesen of John 10:7-10 with The Message’s version of Ps 111:7: from his book, “Wandering in the Wilderness.

“Speaking one time, Jesus said to those around him, to those hanging on his every word: “There is no end of salespeople with their offers, their promises of life & excitement;

snake oil salesmen offering patent medicine solutions to real life matters. Hucksters willing to sell you any baubles that catch your eye. There is no shortage of stories and storytellers with their re-written versions of what is good. However, if you buy in, you will wither and die.

“That’s what they don’t tell you. But I promise, I came but for one reason, that you, each of you, would have abundant life. What I offer is guaranteed to last, never out of date, never obsolete, rust-proof; my Story so grand it will fill your Imagination with Adventure and Awe and Wonder. I offer Life so real and so full and so enduring and so enriching, well, there’s just no words big enough or grand enough to describe it.”

This is the truth we can’t avoid. It’s our duty & the church’s duty to share this and represent it in every way & in all we think & do & are.