**Giving Your Word**

**Text: John 17:17**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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My mother always told me to tell the truth. And mostly, I did. There was the time when she asked me if I’d done my chores and I said, “Sorta-kinda.” That was a trick I’d learned from Leave It to Beaver. I really meant, “No,” but Mom thought I meant “Yes,” which was exactly my plan, and I got to go outside. I felt so guilty that later that day I did my chores.

*Mostly*, when I was a kid, I told the truth. And ever since then I’ve tried to do so as well. I’m sure that your mothers told you to tell the truth as well. I trust that you all have likewise sought to live by their wisdom.

But it is becoming harder to know what the truth is. The world has become so complicated. And it is being “explained” to us from so many directions, by so many forms of media, with so many different biases, using “facts” that may or may not be fabricated. It has even been said that we live in a post-truth world. And we’re left quoting Pontius Pilate of all people when he asks Jesus, “What is truth?” (John 18:38).

As a matter of fact, if you’re going to ask about truth, Jesus is a good place to start. For God has given us God’s Word. And God’s Word is Jesus Christ. And God’s Word is truth. This point is made clear especially in the Gospel of John. 21 times in John alone the word truth is used. And you know some of these references. Like John 8:32, where Jesus says, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” You see, Jesus “came into the world, to testify to the truth” (John 18:37). He spoke nothing but the truth, yet people did not believe him (John 8:45). As the Word of God, Jesus came into the world “full of grace and truth” (John 1:17). Indeed, Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Whatever else that means, it means that we’re estranged from God – we’re separated from God, we’re not even trying to approach God – if we’re telling people lies, if we’re deceiving people, if we’re going with emotion and prejudice and ignoring reason and evidence, if we’re dismissing something because it challenges what we already believe; if we’re not at least *trying* to discern what’s true, and speak the truth, and live our lives according to the truth.

“Your Word is Truth,” Jesus prays to God. And Jesus is God’s Word – God’s Truth – made flesh. We are called to speak the truth – we are called to give our word – because God has given us God’s Word in Jesus Christ. We won’t always succeed in speaking the truth. We won’t always succeed in discerning the truth from lies. Sometimes we’ll be deceived. Sometimes we’ll be *willingly* deceived. But those who follow Jesus Christ are called to speak the truth as best they can, and separate truth from lies to the best of their ability, and honor the principle of adhering to the truth, and call out those who are just making stuff up.

How did we get into this mess of having so many conflicting truth claims, and so many people just believing whatever they want to believe, whether it’s true or not?

It goes back at least as far as the Protestant Reformation, which taught that each individual can approach the Bible himself or herself, and hear the Word of God directly. No longer did you need a priest to tell you the truth, you could figure it out yourself; with the help of the Holy Spirit. Then along came the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on the individual and reason. The Reformation assumed that faithful people would come to similar conclusions about Truth. The Enlightenment assumed that reasonablepeople would come to similar conclusions about Truth. But it didn’t work out that way. Both movements produced a wide range of truth claims. All of this was fine, so long as folks remembered that there’s *my* perspective on truth and *your* perspective on truth, and then something that is *objectively* true, and the point of study and debate and dialogue is to try to get *beyond* our *individual* perspectives so that we can grasp what *really is* true.

But then something called relativism kicked in. You know, the idea that “I have my truth, and you have yours, and let’s just get along.” Some liberals took it one step further and said, “There is no objective truth,” which meant that folks could believe whatever they wanted to believe. Add to that the multiplication of news sources in this post-Walter Cronkite age, and we’ve ended-up with conflicting truths, and no agreed upon standards for measuring truth, and no consensus about what are the reliable sources of truth, and it’s a mess!

Of course, liberals aren’t nearly as much into relativism and tolerance as they let on. A liberal might say, “I have my truth and you have yours,” but push him on something that he’s really passionate about, like economic justice or immigration policy, and BAM!, he’s going to let you have it; as if there is objective truth and he knows exactly what it is and if you don’t accept it, you’re a moron. It’s sort of like a conservative who believes in limited government…until he actually gets control of one!

The fact of the matter is that we all have our core principles, we all have our assumptions about what is absolutely true, we all have our preconceived notions, and then we cherry-pick factoids that confirm what we already believe. Rarely anymore do people try to measure what they really believe against objective standards. Because it takes a lot of work to set aside “my truth” long enough to discern what’s *really* true. It’s hard work, and it’s potentially painful, because we might discover that we’re wrong. Scott Peck, paraphrasing Jesus, said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free, but first it will make you miserable.” “The truth will set you free,” Jesus said. But we ignore Jesus’ invitation to freedom, and choose to be prisoners of our own egos.

The mess that we’re in is at least 500 years in the making. And if we’re going to get out of it, we need to remember, first of all, that “God’s Word is Truth.” Not my word, not your word, but *God’s* Word. My word and your word are, at best, *perspectives* on the truth. We’re all like the blind men who examined an elephant. The first one felt the trunk and said the beast is like a large snake. The second man examined a leg and described the beast as being like a great tree. The third man grabbed the tail and argued that the creature was like a rope hanging down from the heavens. And they all claimed to be right! Well, of course, they were all *partly* right. They all had a *perspective* on the truth.

So do we. There’s always a difference between what’s *really* real and what we *perceive* to be real. We all have limited perspectives and we see things only from those perspectives.

The challenge is to remember that we all have *perspectives* on the truth. The temptation is to think that we each have the *whole* truth. You know, if we disagree, I’m speaking the truth and you’re speaking nonsense. I’ve got facts and you’ve got fake news.” No! *None* of us has the whole truth, *regardless* of our sources. St. Paul says that our knowledge is imperfect. He says that we know only in part. And to think otherwise is to reason like children, he suggests in 1 Corinthians 13.

Your Word is truth, O God. So if we’re going to at least *try* to know the truth and speak the truth and live our lives according to the truth, a good place to start is the book through which the Church has heard God’s Truth, the book through which the Church has heard God’s Word; which is to say, the Bible. The Bible contains the wisdom of the ages. The Bible offers us a lens through which we can view the world. So if we’re going to get out of this mess of living in a supposedly post-truth era, we first need to remember that we each have a perspective and know only in part, and secondly we need to view each other and ourselves and the whole world through the gentle wisdom of the Bible. I don’t have to be right, and I don’t have to be threatened by the possibility that you’re right, but we both need to come to the Word, we both need to sit like Mary at the feet of Jesus, where we can find rest for our overworked egos, and be gentle with each other, and listen to each other and learn from each other.

Discerning the Truth begins with remembering that we each have only *perspectives* on the Truth, and it moves to coming together around the Word and viewing the world through the lens of God’s Truth, and it means, thirdly, having some guidelines for discerning truth amidst all of the conflicting information that’s being thrown at us. Let me suggest several guidelines, and this is by no means an exhaustive list, but maybe it’s a start. So, when you read or hear something, you might ask yourselves these questions:

1. Is there evidence to back it up? You need to check several other sources and assess what the weight of evidence says. That includes taking seriously what the evidence of *science* says.
2. Is there a logical consistency to what is being said? If the argument or the article or the story contradicts itself, then somebody is making stuff up; or at least they don’t know what they’re talking about.
3. How does it fit with your own experience? Your experience is part of the evidence against which you need to weigh somebody’s truth claim.
4. Does it ring true? What does your intuition say about the argument? Because, you see, your intuition is one of the key ways in which you can tap into the guidance of the Holy Spirit; or, as John calls it, the Spirit of Truth.
5. How does it square with biblical faith? How does it square with what the Bible and the Church have taught through the centuries?

We begin with the Word and we come back to the Word. Because while the Word reveals that there really is an objective Reality that is True, we are never going to fully grasp it, or to be fully grasped by it, in this life. “Now we see in a glass darkly,” the Bible says. Only then – on the other side of death – will we see face to face. Now we know in part, only then will we know fully (1 Corinthians 13:12). So I’m looking forward to getting to heaven and finding answers to all the questions that I’ve ever asked. I’m looking forward to that place on the other side of the dark glass when our knowledge will be perfect and the imperfect will pass away. Only then will we know the Truth fully. But when I get there – when we all get there – I’m looking forward to introducing you all to my mother, and saying, “Mom, here are some people whom I dearly love, and they can let you know how well I did with what you taught me always to do. And I hope and pray that we all will hear, not just from our mothers but from Jesus himself, “Well done, good and faithful servants. You have done well to safeguard the Truth. Enter the Kingdom that has been prepared for you.” Amen.