

November 11, 2018

TEXT: 3 John: 1–15

TITLE: Big Themes, Little Books: So What is Truth?

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Tucked away near the end of the New Testament are these three letters from an early church Presbyterian or elder named John. For a variety of reasons, scholars are pretty sure this isn't the same person who wrote the Gospel of John, but was likely a member of the second generation of Christians and someone who had oversight for Greek-speaking congregations in the area around the Mediterranean Sea. In reading this third letter of John, the word that appears the most in this little book is the word "truth." The letter opens with a reference to Gaius, who is "loved in truth" and who faithfully "walks in the truth," before going on to say that as Christians we are to be "faithful to the truth" and willing to be a "co-worker with the truth."

So what is truth? Truth is something that is right, that is accurate and that is not a lie. That all sounds good, but we all know that truth is not always straightforward. A funny children's book I once saw contained this wisdom: *You should always tell the truth. But if your mommy is out having the hair taken off her lip, you might want to forget a few of the details.* That's why in courts of law people take an oath to tell the truth, the whole truth—not just part of the truth, as if truth can be sliced up like a pie and served out in either stingy or generous portions. This question about truth doesn't get easier when we consider the theme as Christians. We are constantly asking ourselves: Where can I find what is true? Is truth located in the pages of the bible? Is it something that comes to us through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? Is it something professed and accepted by the church universal or wherever two or three are gathered in Christ's name? Is it some combination of all those options?

I was thinking about this recently while driving down Route 28 listening to NPR, when I heard part of a weekly program called "The Hidden Brain," hosted by Shankar Vedantam. The guest on the show was not talking about truth, but about time when she made this fascinating observation. She asked the question: "In which direction does time flow?" For example, if you were given a mixed-up batch of pictures that depicted a series of events and you had to lay them out in chronological order, in what direction would you lay out the pictures? Because we are primarily English speakers here, we would organize the pictures from left to right—from the earliest event to the last event—because we read from left to right. But if we were Hebrew or Arabic speakers, reading texts from right to left, we would organize the pictures in the opposite way, from right to left.

I'd never thought of that before. To me, time is the unceasing passage of events and it always flows from past to future, from left to right. But something else—something tied to my culture, to how I read books and magazines, actually affects how I think of the direction of time. Which then led me back to this sermon topic: Is truth affected by culture in the same way? Is truth something clear and absolute in and of itself, or is it dependent on and affected by something else?

Now, driving on Route 28 is not the best place for deep philosophical questions. I knew I needed to pay attention to that winding road, just as I knew I needed a simpler way to communicate this topic. So I boiled it all down to this question: Is truth a possession, something you carry with you wherever you go, or is truth a path you follow as you wander through life? Third John seems to prioritize the second option. Listen again to the verbs associated with the topic of truth. (Vs. 3) *The friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely how you walk in the truth.* (Vs. 4) *My great joy is this—to hear that my children are walking in the truth.* (Vs. 6) *Therefore let us support one another so that we may become co-workers with the truth.*

In this letter, truth doesn't sound like a possession; rather it sounds like a space in which you walk, a path you follow, a colleague or co-worker you accompany through life. Truth is not something you hold in your hand; it is more like the spirit that surrounds as you walk holding someone else's hand. It is not something you possess but rather something that possesses you. Think about it. All of Third John is about relationships—the elder's relationship with Gaius; Gaius showing hospitality and kindness to Christians travelers passing through his village; Diotrephes not showing hospitality to these travelers—and in fact, spreading lies against the elder and not walking in the truth.

This may sound too fuzzy and imprecise to be practical, but actually it is not hard to apply this concept to real life. If our perspective is to walk in God's truth with others, then our first inclination is always to ask "How can my actions support my siblings in Christ?" In last week's election Florida just reinstated voting rights for people convicted of felons but who've served their time in prison. They finally join 47 other states, including Pennsylvania, which allows returning citizens with a felony conviction in their past to exercise their right to vote and select the women and men who will represent them in government. Walking in truth always looks to be inclusive in this way, to seek actions that respect the dignity of other children of God as opposed to labeling, discriminating against, and denigrating those with whom we walk down life's roads together.

How do we walk in the truth after the Tree of Life shooting here or the Thousands Oaks shooting in California—the latest installments in the tragic epidemic of gun violence in America? Innocent people are dying and yes, we need to challenge the language of anti-Semitism and hatred that is far too prevalent in America today—and yes, we need to provide resources for those struggling with mental illness and social isolation. But ultimately this crisis comes down to controlling the weapons of violence. To walk in the truth is to name this scourge as a health and safety crisis—to do common sense steps of banning bump stocks and expanding background checks to all gun purchases; but to walk further as people of faith and demand that we drop the pretense of protecting universal gun ownership because some people like to hunt. No one, no one needs a weapon that fires in an automatic or semi-automatic fashion. No one needs long guns that exist only to kill and maim others. Truth is not defined by one person claiming the right to conceal and carry; truth is defined when every person is able to go to the movies or to a bar or to a church or synagogue and not fear for their life.

Walking in the truth is always a communal act. It involves big goals of hospitality, compassion, safety—not enforcing narrow regulations too often biased by historically racist, sexist, and cultural prejudices. The sin of Sodom long ago was the sin of violating hospitality to strangers and choosing violence and rape over welcome. The sin of Diotrephes in Third John was spreading false charges and lies to narcissistically build himself up while refusing hospitality to others seeking rest from their travels—people who in today’s context may be seeking asylum as they endure a forced migration away from violence at home.

Truth involves how we walk and act together. Scripture is quite clear about this. As soon as Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, their relationship with God was damaged—how did this brokenness manifest itself? Genesis 3 described how God was “walking in the cool of the day” in the garden—but Adam and Eve hid themselves among the trees. Truth walks openly; falsity and sin try to hide in the shadows apart from God and others. Isaiah 2 says *Let us walk in the light of the Lord*. Ephesians 5 says *Walk as children of the light*. Third John vs. 8 *Let us be co-workers with the truth*.

Truth is not something we possess. As Christians, truth is something that possesses us—since Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. We walk with Christ by living stewards of Christ’s truth. One of the reasons I love Stewardship Sunday is to see people of all ages, all stations in life, walk down our long center aisle to offer food, to offer pledges and financial support—basically to walk together as ambassadors of Christ’s truth that claims us all.

So if you wonder what exactly truth is, remember that it is not something small you carry in your pocket; it is something big that carries you as you walk the paths of life with others. The church of John long ago knew this. The church of Christ down through the ages has known this. That is why in our liturgy just about every week, when we hear the good news of the God who loves us, of the risen Christ who redeems us, and the Holy Spirit that inspires and empowers us, our response is not “Yes, I intellectually know that to be true” (as if it were an object to be possessed). Instead we respond in the old Latin phrase “Sursum corda”—which means “Lift up your hearts.” We move from the shadows to the light. We move from isolation and fear to community. We lift up our hearts and rejoice. And praise. And trust that what our souls have felt to be true, is worth living for in our life together. That is the truth in which Christ invites us to walk this day and always. Thanks be to God.

AMEN