

## Sermons from Park Hill: August 3, 2008

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**Sermons from  
Park Hill Congregational UCC  
Denver, Colorado**

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**August 3, 2008**

**John 18: 33-38  
“Truth is Not the Same as Being  
Right”**

Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” What a powerful question! And what does it mean? Webster’s New World dictionary defines truth as “verified or undisputed fact, conformity with fact or reality.” Scientists can prove something to be true, to get satisfaction from research and study. But what about, like, truth in relationships? The dictionary also includes these definitions: truth is “an *ideal* that transcends experience; or honesty and integrity.” Truth can be a fact – and truth can be an ideal. It would seem that those two things are opposites. And was Jesus speaking of fact or ideal? Is the kingdom of God, in this passage of John, a fact or an ideal? Truth...

Ruth Gendler is the author of *The Book of Qualities*. It’s a quirky little book in which she gives different personalities to 100 words – words like compassion, guilt, urgency, blame. For example, she describes the word criticism as “the shortest kid in the class who learned early on to use words to defend himself.” She writes, “Sometimes I want to write Criticism a letter and tell him to leave me alone. The problem is that when I don’t see him for a while, I start to miss him.” About Greed she writes, “Greed eats his food too fast and forgets what it tastes like.” Isn’t that a great image of greed? Truth, Gendler writes, “Truth lingers in the long pauses between questions and answers...;” she sits in the silence. “Truth has time at her dinner table for both certainty and uncertainty.” Sometimes she has a fierce temper, but “she is never willing to live without love.”

In their encounter, Jesus’ response to Pilate’s question, “what is truth,” is left with silence. Eventually Pilate comes to realize that this man has done nothing wrong. The crowd doesn’t want justice though. They want an excuse for revenge. Truth is so often ignored by those who just want a “reason” to destroy their enemies. So, Pilate gives up. Truth doesn’t always come soon enough to save us because it’s not bound by time. But *in* time, truth will emerge. In our personal lives and in our relationships, if only we could be a little less impatient. Instead, think about truth that waits for you to get it. You can tell an addict to his or her face, “you’re an addict,” but not have much impact. But in the isolation of silence meeting reality, the truth will come, and in time, be recognized.

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A desire for quick truth may ruin our search. Both when we want it for ourselves and when we can't wait to give it to someone else. Have you ever had someone throw "truth" in your face? It's not very effective.

Truth that seeks reconciliation is always more effective than truth that seeks revenge or to gain points – a game of one-up-manship. Think of the Commission in South Africa after apartheid. When Nelson Mandela turned 90 a few weeks ago, we were reminded of his wise leadership when he called for a Commission for both Truth *and* Reconciliation. It could have been the Truth and Revenge Commission and no one would have thought it wrong.

We often hear the phrase "I must live by what is true for me." It's a good phrase, and not wrong, but what happens when "truth for me" has to live in community? Truth does not live in isolation. What happens to "truth for me" when we have to relate to family and friends and co-workers? What about the impact of "truth for me" on things like living conditions around the world, for my consumption of everything I want? "Truth for me" or "my truth" doesn't always work very well in relationships. Truth has to live with other people, in our interaction with friends and spouses and partners. What good is truth of any kind, let alone just for me, if it is not shared? What good is it except to make us lonely, though righteous?

Theologian Frederick Buechner distinguishes between truth and a *particular* truth. He says, "A particular truth can be stated in words," as he said, "that life is better than death and love is better than hate, that there is a God or not, that light travels faster than sound. But truth itself is another matter, the truth that Pilate asked for. Truth itself cannot be stated." Truth simply is, but what is it? Truth is the good with the bad. Truth is the joy with the despair. Truth is the presence and absence of God. Truth is answers and more questions and silence in between. Buechner continues, "Before it is a word, the gospel that is truth is silence, a pregnant silence in its ninth month, and in answer to Pilate's question, Jesus keeps silent, and even with his hands tied behind him manages to hold out silence like a terrible gift."

Do we want to know truth? (Can you handle it?) Author Parker Palmer, author of *Let Your Life Lead*, says, "If you want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we are willing to walk quietly in the woods and sit silently for an hour or two at the base of a tree, the creature we are waiting for may well emerge; out of the corner of an eye we will catch a glimpse..." Out of silence, truth may emerge. Is truth yelling at someone to get it? Or waiting to receive it?

Once in a while someone will come to me asking for me to take their side in a personal disagreement, to agree with them about something another person has allegedly said or

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done. And when my pastoral commitment to them is to listen, but not agree they are right, they often become angry. They feel I have betrayed them. I can even agree with them that they are right to feel the way that they do. We all need our pain to be validated. But truth is so much more than being right. Let me say it again: truth is more than being right.

The kind of truth that sets us free is a truth will lead us together, not exist for the purpose of pushing us apart, for the sake of our own pleasure, a game we are trying to win. The desire to be right, even if we are, must still find a way to exist in relationship to one another, or to a community. Truth in science may be a fact; but truth in reality, the real world, among each other, even within ourselves, is more an *ideal* than a fact that can be proven right or wrong. It is something to work for; it is something that comes in time. And that's what some relationships are so challenged by – time and patience. Because truth is gracious, not a way to punish.

That does not mean, however, to be forever silent. Truth is not forever inaction, sitting in contemplation, staring into space. It is not sitting around while someone hurts you. But truth rarely comes from *re*-action. Our first response is often to react and push away – to respond in-kind. Truth that lets us gloat will feel empty very soon; empty especially if our need to be right isn't tempered with love, with time set aside for reconciliation. Remember: As Gendler said, "Real truth is not willing to live without

love." Truth lingers in between the long pauses of questions and answers.

If you want someone to think you're right but won't let time help ease the division; if you won't let time soothe the wounds; then maybe your intention, perhaps because it's born in pain, is not to find truth but to be right, for the other person to be wrong – End of discussion.

Sometimes those who want to be right won't even ask the party who offended them for the truth but will tell anyone who will listen, and a few more who don't want to, that the other party hasn't told the truth. The religious leaders simply decided that Jesus is wrong. What is the response when Pilate asks what Jesus has done wrong? Crucify him anyway.

So far I've said that truth is something we share in relationship, it doesn't exist alone; the search for truth must linger in silence and time; I've said that we should seek truth in relationships more as an ideal so we may work together for reconciliation than a fact that we can use to punish someone. But, if so, then how do we hold one another accountable? Truth is also accountability. Well, I have five suggestions: How do we hold one another accountable? Carefully. Humbly. Respectfully. With the right motives. Relying on God's grace.

Remember: Truth is not the same as being right.