

## What Is Truth?

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The Devil and one of his minions were walking down the road. The Devil's foot struck an implacable, firm object, and he said to his minion, "Reach down and get that for me, will you please?" He did, and he said, "Sire, here it is. It seems to be a piece of truth!" The Devil seemed nonplussed, and didn't seem to care. He said, "Sire! Aren't you frightened? It is said that the truth shall set you free. This is exactly what we don't want people to find: truth!" The Devil said, "I'm not worried about it, because very quickly, they will take a piece of truth and turn it into a religion, and we'll be OK."

What I want to talk about this morning is a very poignant question, which has reverberated down human history. It's actually found in the story of Jesus's last hours. Now, there is a figure in the Bible who doesn't get much play. There is a story about a little boy in Sunday school who is drawing a picture of Jesus and the Holy Family. They're in an airplane, and there is a guy in the front. The teacher asks, "I know who they are; that's the Holy Family. But who's the person driving the plane?" The little kid says, "Pontius the Pilot." Pontius Pilate is a Roman administrator; and because the people who wrote the Gospels were very interested in playing up as best they could to Rome, they basically portray Pilate as a kind of good guy, a disinterested player. There are people who want Jesus dead, and then there are people who think Jesus is the Messiah. Pilate is the only person who is poised in the middle, asking good questions. In that sense, when we read the Gospels today, we can sort of identify with Pilate; he is an oddly modern character set in this old story.

When Jesus is brought before him, Pilate asks him questions. Of course, we're talking about questions this year; most of my sermons are going to be on the key questions of life. He asks, "Where are you from?" There is no answer. "What have you done? Are you a king?" Then he asks one of the most important questions in human history. I can remember when I first encountered this. I don't remember ever hearing it in church; I actually read it for the first time one night as I was studying for a final in New Testament. It is haunting; it is from the Gospel of John. Pilate looks at this poor, bedraggled, soon-to-be-crucified figure who stands in silence before him, and he asks the question, "What is truth?" Interestingly, Jesus does not answer. He stands mute. There is no answer; there are no words. What lies before Pilate is simply a life—a life that must speak its own integrity, its own dreams, its own truth. Truth is not a thing. Truth isn't a proposition. Truth isn't a definition. Truth isn't an equation. Truth is a life, lived in the flow of reality, buffeted by pressures of all kinds, and inspired by beauty.

I don't know how you reacted to that duet earlier in the service; but it made me glad I come every week, because you just never know when you're going to get blindsided by beauty, and that's it. So here we are, poised in a world that is equally beautiful and equally bruised. Pilate's question is a good one, but we have to be very careful about how we choose to answer it. What is truth? One man went to a teacher to take him on as his disciple. "If what you seek is truth," said the teacher, "there are requirements that need to be fulfilled, and duties to be discharged." "What are those?" "Well, every morning, you have to get up and draw water, and chop wood, and do the housecleaning and the cooking." The disciple got up to leave; he said, "What I seek is truth, not work." But Unitarian-Universalists know—and you wouldn't be in this room unless you understood—that there is a daily-ness and an every-day-ness to this pursuit of truth. It is a life lived in the flow of reality. Some of you know my definition of spirituality, and it perplexes some people, but here it is: Spirituality, to me, is as much truth as we can stand, as

much truth as we can absorb. It is the apprehension of the realities and verities of our existence; and our existence includes our work, our neighborliness, and our relationships; the decisions that we make, and the mistakes that we make; and the things we leave undone as well as the things we do. It is the totality and quality of our life; it is not a proposition to be proved or disproved, true or false.

What is truth? We stand silent before it, but we live it; we experience it; we know it. It's in our fourth principle, which is defined for Unitarian-Universalists as the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. For Unitarian-Universalists, truth is in that sense a destination we work toward, freely and responsibly, and it is a search; it most assuredly is a search. Pilate asks, "Where are you from? What have you done? What is truth?" They're pretty good questions. This sermon isn't an invitation to become philosophy majors. People can discuss the nature of truth all they want. I know it's ironic that I'm doing a twenty-minute sermon when I should stand mute before you, as Jesus did; but the reality is that's my job. I tell stories; we point at things, and we allude to things, and we evoke things. Through music, and prayer, and silence, and yes, through sermons, we try to indicate ways in which the totality of your life can make sense, can cohere, can be whole, can be healed. That's the truth that we search for; that's the truth that calls out to us.

Walter Kaufmann, the philosopher, says:

*The world wants to be deceived. The truth is too complex and frightening; the taste for the truth is an acquired taste that few acquire.*

And yet we long for this truth, this higher truth, this emerging truth, this truth that is lived in the fullness of our being. You may remember the movie in which the character played by Jack Nicholson is on the stand, and he says, "You want the truth? You can't handle the truth!" I thought to myself, "Yeah! That's right!" Very few of us can; and yet we have this insistent, persistent longing for it. We keep asking that question that Pilate asked, over and over again. We want the truth. The truth is hard to handle sometimes; it really is. But the interesting thing is that the truth comes at us like a locomotive. It cannot be evaded, not really. The truth will come along sooner or later, and handle us (sometimes manhandle us); but one way or another, the reality will come. It will be present; it will fill us; it will suffuse us. It is as much truth as we can take; it is as much truth as we are ready for; it is as much truth as can be invoked in the mystery of everyday living. Lao Tzu said,

*The highest truth cannot be put into words. Therefore, the greatest teacher has nothing to say. The greatest teacher offers service, and never worries.*

Truth is not a thing. It is not, in this sense, to be caught, or to be captured, or to be overly defined. That is often where we go wrong. In our longing and hunger for truth, very often we project untruth onto the screen of reality. How much human energy has gone into things like believing, "My vision of God is the only vision, and if you don't accept what I believe, you're going to Hell." That's a lot of wasted human thought and energy. Not only has it been cruel, and blasphemous at its core; it is a titanic waste of time, because it has no application to reality—the reality that we as Unitarian-Universalists may live and experience and confront. Truth is not invariant. It is a search; it is a hope and a trust that the meaning of our lives will emerge in time; each day, each year, it will arise, it will evolve, it comes at us.

How do we search for truth? David Rankin, one of our great ministers, once wrote a meditation entitled “A Fetish for Fads.” He writes,

*I feel sorry for Jake. We were friends in seminary, many years ago, and now I find he is a broken soul. When he was a college student, he was into existentialism: Camus and Sartre and Kierkegaard. When he was a graduate student, he was into world religions: Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Then he was a theological student, and into the new psychology: Fromm, Rogers, and Maslow. When he was a minister, he went into experimental worship, guitars, folk-songs, and dialogue. When he was a community organizer, he was into direct action: marches, sit-ins, and rallies. When he was a welfare recipient, he was into human potential: EST, Rolfing, and holistic medicine.*

*Jake had discovered all kinds of things, but he had never bothered to find the center of himself; and he could not dance in the empty spaces, or to the sound of no birds singing.*

What is David trying to say there? I think he is trying to say that there is no answer to that question, “what is truth.” Even the search has to be pursued in that still center of your being, which is why it is important—vitaly important—for Unitarian-Universalists to take very seriously the discipline and invitation of silence: to be still, to be quiet, to listen.

Truth is in every cell of our body. Truth resides in every second you live, and every breath you draw, and every heartbeat you are gifted to have. The Unitarian-Universalist church in Greensboro, North Carolina has about as nice a mission conception as I’ve ever had. I’d like to share it with you, because it encapsulates this lovely sense of what it means to open our hearts, our minds, and our being into this search:

*Being Unitarian-Universalist means taking personal responsibility for your own religious life. No one will try to remake you religiously. We will not offer you “final and absolute truths” or rigid dogma. Instead, we will provide a stimulating and congenial atmosphere in which you may seek answers within yourself; in which you may ask your questions; in which you are free to discover the best that is within you.*

*We reject the idea that any book or any institution is superior to the conscience and intellect of a morally responsible person. We affirm that your spiritual well-being is yours. No one can live your life for you.*

Here is one of the great paradoxes of the spiritual life. Even as it’s true that no one can live this free and responsible search for truth for you, I have discovered through the years that it is much easier to be with friends—to be in a circle of shared silence, to be in a context where I know that people are working through their quandaries (and they are real, and they are rich; this is not an abstraction). Just this week, when I was talking to George before he was going into his operation, he said to me in the end of a long conversation, “Stephen, I have been a very, very lucky man. I’m going to tell you I have discovered that the very truth of my life has been in those rich friendships and relationships I’ve been treasured to have.” Another person sent a gift that came with a long and lovely note, full of depth and kindness, and noted that same quandary that Ruth evoked at the very beginning of the service, which is that as we Unitarian-Universalists seek for truth, we need to be open to the totality of truth, not to the formulas of truth.

A man was doing his Ph.D. in philosophy, and one day his wife realized how seriously he was taking his studies, when she asked him, “Why is that you love me so much?” He thought,

and he replied, “When you say ‘so much,’ are you referring to intensity, depth, frequency, quality, or duration?” “Why is it you love me so much” is one of those questions that we’ve been talking about over the last several weeks, and will as the year goes on. “Who are you? Are you lost? What have you done? Where are you from? What is truth?” The search is work; it is also a glory. It is flexible, and resilient, and persistent, and patient; it is challenging, and always emerging. Truth is simply a life, that’s all: your life, not a formula, not a definition. You do not believe a truth; my friends, we become a truth. Amen.