

Truth Bearing or Truth Baring?  
John 16:12 -15 - Spirit of Truth

At my house we read a good bit. Our summer project is to read all of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*.

In the opening book, *The Magician's Nephew*, Aslan the Lion who has all the attributes and powers of God himself questions a little boy. The little boy, you see, has served as a catalyst. He has freed the White Witch from her thousand year slumber - like Adam and Eve before him he has brought evil into the world.

Aslan, the God-Lion asks him how the witch came to be in Narnia. "She followed us here, we couldn't lose her." That is boy's first answer. The Lion presses. "Well we found her in a world made dead, completely dead by her evil." That is the second answer, edging closer to what actually happened. "We came into this great castle and she sprang to life and she will not leave us alone," the Lion waits, "actually I brought her to life because I was curious. I did it Aslan."

The truth. Sometimes obligatory. Sometimes elusive. Sometimes painful. Always revealing. The truth defines and directs us.

All of the "coming of age" moments in our lives are related to the discovery of the truth.

The only lessons worth learning are those learned at truth's feet.

But man and woman have an uneasy relationship with truth. Because the truth is hard and because it is elusive and it impossible to resist the temptation to craft it to suit our ends. Shape it to mold to our purpose. On TV news and in the blogosphere it is called spin.

Spin it to win it.

Want to hear a little spin? Watch Congressional hearings. The truth is in there, right? Hard to tell most of the time.

It turns out that "truth" can have a variety of meanings and applications:

- a particular fact or reality
- the body of real things, events,
- fidelity to an original or to a standard,
- fidelity,
- constancy or sincerity in action<sup>i</sup>

One of the constant challenges in our current cultural moment is what we call relativism. That one's experience determines how one views the "truth."

For much of our history truth was viewed to be objective or absolute. Like the sun in the sky it was a fixed mark and science and reason and logic and philosophy were committed to unlocking its secrets.

And then came Einstein in physics and the Frenchmen Derrida and Foucault in philosophy and still others in mathematics and more in the theology and biblical interpretation who began to tell us that the truths that hold us and define us, though related to absolutes and constants, were indeed relative and subjective and could never be divorced from our experience.

Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, right?

Or think of it this way -- though the sun is a constant where we are determines near everything while we are viewing it. Sometimes it's blocked by clouds. Sometimes it's obscured by trees. It is behind us if we are heading one way, and in our eyes if we are heading another. It is constant. But it is ever in flux. Where you are at any given moment determines how you sense and experience it.

Remember the old X-Files TV show of a decade ago -- "The truth is out there" -- it is, it always is. We just have a hard time seeing it and trusting it and sharing it. Our lives are placed up against it and we do not want to get burned in the intense glare that the truth subjects us to. Often we'd rather believe the lie or the half-truth instead of the whole truth -- "do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God" - that is what the court officer asks.

What a tough question. There are tougher ones though. Please don't think that the Bible is void of this conversation about truth. It is not. To be sure the entire Bible tips its hat to the concept and the declaration of "truth" -- but John's Gospel has a special concern with the promulgation and declaration of "truth." The word truth appears 40 or so times in John's Gospel - far more often than in any other book of the New Testament. In Greek, the New Testament's original language, the word for truth is *alethia*. Say it out loud -- it sounds ancient and wonderful, elegant and mysterious. *alethia*

In addition to the phrase, "the Spirit of Truth" which is our text for the day, John also gives us the following considerations:

"grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" John 1:17

"you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" John 8:32

"I am the way and the truth and the life" John 14:6

It is an amazing pattern and an amazing concern for John. John's gospel clearly finds the truth exciting and mysterious, defining and revealing.

I wonder if it is the same for us? Do we find the truth mysterious and amazing? Does it allude us?

In John's Gospel this consideration of the truth reaches its apex at John 18:38. Jesus is on trial, and Pontius Pilate, Roman nobleman, educated and literate, the governor and

the man upon whom Jesus' fate will ultimately rest, looks at Jesus and asks THE QUESTION, and I mean to say that it is THE QUESTION!

Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" (John 18:38)

What is truth?

This verse haunts me. I think of it all the time. Sometimes I open my Bible and just turn to John 18:38 and read it. I want to make sure that it is still there - that some gremlin has not come in overnight and erased it. I don't want the power of that question, or the desperation behind it, to suddenly be taken away. Like a dream at the dawn, that once eyes have opened, has been lost in the ether. I want it to be there. I need it to be there. I need to know that someone else has wondered this and struggled on this path. Is there a more common or necessary question that we can ask -- "Is it the truth? Is this true? What is truth?"

Today we are considering John 16: 12 - 15 -- where Jesus Spirit of Truth We have this text today because it is one of the many texts from John that affirms our trust in the Trinity. Jesus tells us repeatedly that he is one with the father in John's gospel. And here he tells the disciples that there is much to tell them that they are not ready to bear or hear or carry or understand. But that the Spirit of Truth, that is the Holy Spirit, will "guide and speak" to those who follow Jesus.

New Testament scholar William Barclay, perhaps the finest interpreter of John, says that this text teaches us the principles of revelation better than any text in the Bible. "We have a special name," Barclay writes, "for the bringing of God's truth to [humans]; we call it revelation."<sup>ii</sup> God's Spirit of Truth is always teaching us, always leading us, always revealing to us. God speaks, God reveals, and we are called to trust and to follow. Did you ever just "know something" -- that is to say understand something to be true? We can't explain it because it is an experience of faith and one of the faithful responses that we are called to share with God are the observances of revealed truths. God's direction of the world did not end with the final book of the New Testament. God is still revealing and speaking -- this is the work of the Spirit of Truth -- truth is still out there as God reveals to us "in here" -- heart, soul, and mind.

One of the little books that I have purchased for friends over the years as they have struggled for faith -- highly educated friends, people who are used to being right -- is Dr. Michael Guillen's "Can A Smart Person Believe In God?" Guillen is a physicist and the son of a minister who for years was the science editor for ABC news, and he has a great take on the questions that confound many a thinking person when the question of faith comes to roost. People struggle for faith, and they ask, "how can I know that what we believe is true?"

Just another way of asking, "what is truth?" (Pilate's question...)

Guillen's argument is simple enough. We are given by God an IQ -- intelligence quotient -- that allows for memory and understanding of material world, that allows for reason

and logic. At the same time we are given what he calls an SQ -- a spiritual quotient.<sup>iii</sup> The part of ourselves we are born with that tunes us into God's revelations, God's spirit of Truth which is directing and shaping our lives all the time. Guillen writes, "we can't see, hear, touch, taste or smell them, but our spiritual realities are our principle source of purpose, consolation, and deep seated happiness."<sup>iv</sup>

Take away either, he argues, the IQ or the SQ, the knowledge we get from books or the knowledge we get from God and we are incomplete.

Did you ever just get the feeling that you simply belonged somewhere? Logic couldn't make it add up. Deduction wouldn't deduce to get you there. Just a break-through and an "AHA!" and you just knew. What you felt had to be true?

Revealed truth comes to us as inspiration. Handel, when he was writing the Hallelujah Chorus from *The Messiah* simply told that he was inspired -- "I looked and the heavens opened and I saw Great God sitting on a Throne"<sup>v</sup>

I will always be grateful to the 18 year old young man in my rear-view mirror, who in spite of all the logic -- LSU is cheaper, more affordable, your friends are going there, your family will be nearer, you'll enter with more course credits under your belt -- in spite of all the reasonable arguments listened to leading of the Spirit of Truth. I saw that little Presbyterian college near Charlotte and it simply felt like I belonged and to not engage that place would have been incomplete. That 18 year old followed that feeling and met his wife and found his calling and gained the family he loves.

Like the scientist who hits a dead end and then inexplicably has a breakthrough. Human thought goes no further. Reason runs its courses. Barclay writes, "And just then [against the shut door] the solution flashes into his mind. He did not think it out; it was given to him. When his thinking mind had reached its limit, God came in. All truth is God's truth, and the revelation of all truth is the work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>vi</sup>

So often what I find is that we are constantly aware of God's truth, we are just afraid to speak it, or name it, or live with it. It is easier to keep silent. It is simpler to continue the lie.

One of the most confounding projects of the Christian life is the tension between truth bearing (spell:BEARING) and truth baring (spell:BARING). We hold truths in confidence, we bear them at our expense, for others. Discretion, protection, and caring prevent me from sharing them. People suffer mightily and there is great trouble in the hearts of many lovely people. Truths hem them in. Old truths about the past and about family and about mistakes and about failures.

Other times we help people to name the truth that they are afraid to speak -- we help them bare the truth. And in this truth baring a relief comes -- sin, suffering, evil employ their power of influence and control as long as they go unnamed. Once the truths are named recovery begins. Jesus is not just paying lip service when he says, "the truth will set you free." That's a promise made good over and over again.

One wonders which is the greater task -- bearing or baring? Yes they are different, but they are completely related.

The Cross: Jesus pulls it off on the cross insofar as he is doing both simultaneously: baring the truth of grace while bearing the truths about the world. I am amazed in this mystery. Always have been.

All this returns me to Pilate's question, so painful -- so much a part of where we are: "What is truth?" (John 18:38)

How could Pilate not have known? Is it possible to miss the truth when it is right in your face, just as Jesus was only inches away from Pilate? Or did Pilate need it spun so desperately, did he need it to fit his ends so terribly that he was willing to deny it as it was right before him?

I pray that I'll not deny the truth when I find it, or when it finds me. I pray even harder that I don't make the commonplace attempt to spin it to fit my ends.

"Tell it like it is," sang the Neville brothers. Whether we bear it or bare it, the truth is best served un-spun. All truth, after all, belongs to God: Jesus tells us as much in John 16.

I pray we'll be as aware of our SQ's as we are our IQ's. I pray we'll learn to trust that leading of the Spirit of Truth and its constancy as much as we trust the other measurements and readings that set the courses of our lives.

In the 1992 the movie *A Few Good Men* debuted and it climaxes with Jack Nicholson's most famous performance -- as his marine colonel shouts at the brash young attorney "You can't handle the truth."

Why? Because the truth is hard to BEAR and to BARE.

But the Lion, Aslan, our God knows it best. The truth was not ours to begin with. It is not ours to BEAR or BARE alone.

Thanks be to God for the Spirit of Truth which directs our days, lightens our loads, and leads us into the great blessings of our lives.

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<sup>i</sup> This is the opening paragraph from Wikipedia on "truth". Edited and paraphrased by me.

<sup>ii</sup> page 226 volume 2 Barclays commentary

<sup>iii</sup> page 4 of Guillen's book

<sup>iv</sup> page 146 of Guillen's book

<sup>v</sup> page 228 volume 2 Barclays commentary

<sup>vi</sup> Barclay page 228-229