

MY TRUTH, YOUR TRUTH, THE TRUTH

Mark 16: 1-8; John 18: 29-31, 33-38a; Luke 5: 1-11; 1 John 4: 7-12, 18-21

Do you believe in truth? Do you believe there is a truth that is not just my truth or your truth, but a truth bigger than you and me that is true for all of us whether we recognize it or not, accept it or not? Increasingly, we live in a world that doesn't believe there is any larger truth than yours and mine, and such belief has become mainstream, even in our popular speech. It used to be that people spoke about their perspectives or opinions on some particular situation or experience. People didn't confuse their opinion or perspective with the truth capital T. The goal, of course was that their opinion or perspective conform with the Truth somehow. They didn't own the truth. No one did. There was always a larger truth that we had to figure out. Now, however, people speak about my truth and your truth. Does that mean there is no other truth but yours, mine, his, hers or theirs? Or is there a larger truth to which we are all called to conform and align ourselves?

One of the big political stories in the last few months has to do with the resignation of one of the most respected cabinet ministers in the Liberal government – Jody Wilson-Raybould. Before she was allowed to tell her side of what had happened, she spoke up in parliament. She said that she looked forward to having the opportunity to speak 'her truth.' Now let me be clear: I really respect Wilson-Raybould. I think her leadership is a huge loss for the liberal government on many levels – She is brilliant and talented, besides being indigenous and a woman. She is also someone highly credible who brought a lot of integrity to the government as a whole, to the position of Attorney General and as Minister of Justice. But the fact that she spoke about 'her truth' tells us how this has become part of the normal way of speaking and understanding truth in our society. Like many other examples, we live in a time when relativism of values has become mainstream. Laws and beliefs are nothing more than human constructs, things we create. There is no longer any larger transcendent truth that is true regardless of what I think or create, be it rooted in a religious tradition, natural law or some other foundation that must guide our public debates on values or beliefs. Without any transcendence of value or truth, it's up to you and me to invent or create the truth. That means we can bend it this way and that if we can persuade ourselves and others that it's in our interest so to do.

Well, what I'd like to do in the next 15 minutes, is pave a path toward a larger understanding of truth bigger than yours and mine. The scriptures as read through Jesus' revelation will be our way through. Let's see where our path takes us...

1) There are four readings that will guide us along. Our first reading is the earliest account of Jesus' resurrection. Let's listen to it now: Mark 16: 1-8: "When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' ⁸So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

When it comes to truth, we often hear the phrase: "just the facts, please." We don't want long explanations or interpretations. We don't trust them. We just want the facts straight up. The problem with just the facts too often, though, is that they leave way too much to the imagination or interpretation. All we have in this earliest account of the resurrection is an empty tomb and some witnesses. And think about the witnesses. How credible are they? In that world then, the testimony of three women, and women who are already followers of Jesus, would not be credible in the least? And then there's this "young man, dressed in white" whom no one claims to see but the women. Who is this guy? An angel? Or someone more sinister in disguise? There's only one fact that's certain here: the tomb is empty.

What other explanations could there be for the empty tomb but the one the women have to offer, if they choose to speak? The most obvious explanation is that the body was moved. By whom? Was it grave robbers? Certainly this was common at the time, especially with tombs owned by wealthier families with precious items buried along with a loved one. That's why security at the tomb was critical. Or, another explanation which quickly spread at the time is an explanation spread by Jesus' political rivals - that somehow Jesus' disciples stole the body and then claimed he was resurrected in a bid to resurrect faith in their messiah.

So who are we supposed to believe: A few women who are traumatized and heavily biased in a certain direction, or any number of other possible and likely explanations? Whose truth is the truth here? Do we believe Jody Wilson-Raybould, or do we believe the PM? The resignation of minister Jane Philpott in support of Wilson-Raybould also adds credibility to Wilson-Raybould's truth. On the other hand, the PM and others who have spoken want to complexify the issues and claim there were larger interests other than politics at play, issues like jobs and the welfare of Canada as a whole. Who's truth do we believe?

2) This takes us to our 2nd reading from the gospel according to John. The religious authorities clearly want Jesus tried with the goal of having him executed. But what about the Roman governor Pilate? Let's listen to our reading now:

John 18: 29-31, 33-38a: "Pilate, the Roman governor, went out to them and said, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' ³⁰The religious authorities answered, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.' ³¹Pilate said to them, 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law.' They replied, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death.' ³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' ³⁴Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' ³⁵Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' ³⁶Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' ³⁷Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' ³⁸Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'"

Here we have clear testimony that the religious authorities want Jesus killed. But what about Pilate? What does he care about? Does he care about getting at the truth about Jesus regardless of what the religious authorities claim? What's good for Rome? Well, Pilate and Jesus have a fascinating exchange about truth. Let's flesh it out a little more. Pilate asks Jesus: "So you are a king?" Jesus answers something like this: "you say that I am a king. But I'm not the kind of king you probably think I am. I was born into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. They recognize the truth I'm bearing witness to as the truth." This, in essence is what Jesus is saying.

Does Pilate care, though? He asks Jesus: "What is truth?" "You talk of truth, Jesus. So what. Who cares. It's power that runs the world. It's power that counts." Pilate, like the religious authorities and like so many in the world, care about power much more than they care about truth. My truth or your truth, who cares. All that matters is what people will believe, and all that counts is how their beliefs will feed into our power and control over the situation. Sadly, this is not only true of Rome and ancient rule. It is just as true today. Many of us become cynical with our governments because we don't trust what they say or the decisions they make. Sadly, what's happened with the whole SNC-Lavalin affair just feeds our cynicism about truth that much more. We believe politics are much more at play than anything to do with justice or jobs as the defining factor in what we're told about what actually happened. And the more anyone seems to be hiding information or limiting what's spoken and to whom, the more we become cynical about truth.

Like Pilate, Like Trump, like Putin, like Chinese officials or like so many rulers today, truth is irrelevant. Truth is whatever we say it is. If and when we have the power, we decide what truth is. Power rules. Who cares about truth.

But this is not where the discussion ends, far from it. For any shred of authenticity in us hungers for something more when it comes to truth. How do we find our way to truth, not just my truth or your truth, but a truth larger than me and you that calls to us deep inside, a truth much more important than power? Are we hungry for truth? Are we willing to search for it, struggle for it, fight for it, even die for it because we want our lives to conform to a truth that is bigger than just me and mine? Let's listen to our third reading as Jesus calls his first disciples. In particular, pay attention to what happens to Simon Peter:

Luke 5: 1-11: Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ²he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. ⁴When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' ⁵Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' ⁶When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. ⁷So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!' ⁹For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; ¹⁰and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.' ¹¹When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

Why do James, John and Simon Peter follow Jesus? What is it that compels them? Is it Jesus' power or how they'll get ahead if they follow him? No. There is something else about Jesus that compels them, some bigger truth that shines right into them heart and soul. For Peter, the light that shines into him causes him shame. The light shows up all that is compromised, self-interested, deceitful and false in him. If there is a larger truth it has to get to us heart and soul past the facades, the cynicism and the pretence. The light of truth has to confront us and challenge us to be more real, more authentic, more genuine. Jesus' purity exposes Peter.

It's like the me-too movement. It's like the truth and reconciliation commission. We live in a time where public apologies and confessions have become common. People are found out. Past actions by individuals, by men, by governments, by police, by clergy, by those in leadership in private corporations or the artistic community are being confronted and brought to the light. Truth is being spoken and revealed and people are challenged. Sadly, though, even as larger truth is exposed, we can't always trust apologies and confessions as coming from sincere motivations of the heart. There is public shaming and blaming. There are legal and financial repercussions. There are all kinds of pressures and necessities that motivate people one way or the other. How can we trust any confession and apology as deeply sincere and true, coming from heart and soul?

But what Peter does for us is point to a larger truth. Truth that is not just mine or yours or hers, is truth that is somehow connected to the heart and soul. It's about human dignity and respect. It's about reverence for the value of life beyond what's good for me and you and what keeps us in power. Larger truth has to do with the welfare of people, whoever they are, regardless of their power or lack of it. Truth is important because it's greater than any one person's control, influence or spin. It tears through that to shine a light and many of us are exposed. How do we deal with that? How do we deal with truth in our lives especially when we have to go on our knees and recognize we need to conform to something larger than ourselves and what's comfortable or convenient? How do we deal with truth when we must confront the real humanity and the creation around us that's been wounded and harmed by the falsity in our lives?

Real truth demands our attention and our submission if we're going to be real, honest and authentic. We can live a lie and continue to try to deceive others and ourselves. But real truth will not let us rest. It demands our full attention because it's about real people, real life and a real creation that will not let us off the hook.

Now we are ready to name this larger truth more fully. Let's listen to our final reading:

1 John 4: 7-12,18-21: Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

According to our biblical tradition as interpreted through Jesus, the larger truth at the heart of the universe, the larger truth that is you and me is that we have been created out of love and we have been created to serve that love in all of who we are and all of what we think, say and do. How does everything we think, say and do measure up to the larger truth that is love? Real love is something that costs us. Responsibility for other life, generosity, compassion, service... it costs us when it comes from the heart. Accepting responsibility, confessing, repenting, redressing things, forgiving and being open to peace and reconciliation and even friendship... it costs us when it is real.

But this is the deepest and highest truth in the world. Past all the evil and lies, the hate and abuse, the indifference, the power-moves and the spin... past all that genuine love is the larger truth of things. That's what Jesus reveals and embodies. That's what Jesus dies for and that's what his resurrection empowers us to believe and live: that love must always win beginning with us in our lives, our relationships, our interactions, our commitments, our politics, our actions and reactions. We will find our way to the truth of love again and again as our guiding light.

Truth is not just what I or you decide it is. There is more to truth than what's mine. I must constantly measure my life and consider whether I've veered off the path of truth as love in what's going on in my life in particular situations and relationships. Who knows where the ultimate truth lies between Wilson-Raybould and the PM's office. But what we can know is that in the long run we will all be judged by how much our lives and our decisions have been weighed by the balance of the ultimate truth which is and who is: love. May such truth inspire and empower us in the details of our lives so that our truth and the truth come closer together; Amen.