

Telling the Truth: The Witness of Bill Moyers

John 1:1-9; 18:33-38

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The truth is a big deal in the Bible, but it is a very, very big deal in the Gospel according to John. Truth or falsehood, light or darkness shows up on every page. Right off, chapter 1:

What has come into being⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it. ...⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ...¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Light and truth are mentioned six times in the first fourteen verses of John's potent but elegant prose. And John does not let up. In chapter 3, Nicodemus comes to Jesus during the night, under the cover of darkness, and Jesus tells him those who "do what is true" will be attracted to the light (3:21). God is truth (3:33) and is to be worshipped "in spirit and truth" (4:24). Skipping over to chapter 8, Jesus tells those who follow him that if they would be his disciples, they will know the truth, "and the truth will make you free" (8:32). A few verses later, God as truth is contrasted with the devil, who is the "father of lies" (8:44). Later, Jesus tells his anxious disciples, worried about his departure from them, that he is going to

prepare a place for them and says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6), and promises to give them the “spirit of truth” (14:17). Jesus prays that God will sanctify Jesus’ disciples in truth and that they will be consecrated in truth (17:17-19). Suffice it to say, truth and falsehood, light and darkness continue to be central themes. And I must mention one of my favorites, is the opening lines to John 20: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb...”

Let me pause and make an aside. One of the biblical marks of sin and death, falsehood and evil is that they operate in the dark, in secret, covered and hidden. So, hear me clearly: whenever you see ICE agents in masks, refusing to identify themselves, hidden from view, you can be sure evil, falsehood and darkness are at work. The work of God, the work of truth and light are not hidden behind masks refusing to identify themselves. The light of the God we know in Jesus Christ, shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it! (John 1:5)

Which brings us to the famous scene, we read a few minutes ago, between Jesus and Pilate. In six concise verses John shows us a contest between two ways of living, two ways of seeing the world. Up to now, the contest has been between Jesus and the religious leaders. They all agree on the centrality of truth with the disagreement being about how to live truth out. But here with Pilate, the representative of the Roman Empire, it is whether truth matters at all, and if there is any such thing as truth. It is about truth versus power, and with power, there is no truth but might. If

lies serve power, then you use lies and falsehood. Such is the ethos of empires and emperors and wanna-be kings.

Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” For the Empire, this is the only question worth asking. Are you trying to get power? Are you trying to be a rival kind of power? Jesus responds by asking Pilate a question, “Are you asking this on your own, or are you doing the bidding of others?” It is not something usually done when the accused asks the questions. Pilate responds scornfully, defensively, “I am not a Jew, and it is the Jews who are accusing you of being a king.” Jesus replies, “My kingdom is not of this world.” In other words, “Yes, I am a king but not like anything you understand.” Pilate comes back to his original question, “So, you are a king?” And Jesus says, “You say I’m a king. Everything I am and have done is to bear witness to the truth. And everyone who knows this truth understands what I’m talking about.” Pilate responds, “What is truth?”

Folks, you can’t make this stuff up. This story seems to be right out of today’s headlines.

Bill Moyers believed the truth was a big deal, too. He devoted his life to telling the truth, knowing the truth, and being a person of truth. Bill, friend of this church, and a friend and encourager to me, died Thursday (June 26) in New York’s Sloane-Kettering Hospital from complications related to prostate cancer. He was 91. In the last few years, our Quilting

Group had sent quilts for both Bill and his wife Judith. More than once, when Bill or Judith was ill or simply sitting in their chairs watching TV, Bill said that both had the prayer quilts on their laps.

Every Sunday night for the last dozen years or so, at his request, I emailed Bill a copy of my sermon from that morning. Often a few weeks would go by, and I wouldn't hear from him, then about when I thought he might have forgotten about it, I'd get an email with his encouraging comments about several of them. The last email I received from Bill, was just a month ago. He wrote simply, "Very timely, Kyle. You are going strong again. I needed this one today!!!!"

Bill grew up in Marshall and went to the University of Texas as well as Southwestern Baptist Seminary, getting a BD in 1960. During that time, he pastored a small, country Baptist church east of Hillsboro, but it did not take long for him to return to his first love, journalism. He told me once, over the phone, that coming up with a sermon for those good folks every Sunday became more than he felt like he could do with any integrity, so he gave it up.

Eventually, Bill worked for Lyndon Johnson and ended up in the White House. He said, "When I became White House press secretary against my will, in 1965, my father, a Baptist deacon, sent me a telegram saying, 'Bill, tell the truth if you can, but if you can't tell the truth, don't tell

a lie.’ He had a fourth-grade education and was the most honest man I ever knew. I did my best to honor his wish.”

And honor it he did. Bill was renown as a journalist with integrity and honesty, who spoke truth to power. He was highly critical of journalism being bought out and bought off by big corporations and big money. He once said of such journalism, “They don’t know the difference between a weathervane and a compass.” One of the tributes about Bill said, “He was a truth-teller, not a stenographer for the powerful.”

In 1999, Bill delivered the Lale Lectures at SFA, at Archie McDonald’s invitation. One of the images from that lecture has stayed with me. Bill talked about the corruption of the media by big money and power, and how some stories are quashed, and some questions not asked. Bill asked, at night when we hear all the dogs barking in the neighborhood, do we ever stop and ask what dogs are not barking? What stories are not being told? What and where and why is there silence?

Back in chapter 8 of John, when Jesus tells us, “You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free,” (8:32), Jesus is telling us that we are in captivity to lies, falsehood, and darkness. We are in bondage.

Every day, every hour, everywhere, we are inundated by lies, falsehoods, half-truths, alternative truths, fake news, disinformation on everything from consumer products that promise to make us happy, healthy, or handsome to the assertion that the 2020 presidential election

was a lie, or that the Jan. 6 insurrection was about freedom and patriotism, or that the Iranian nuclear facilities were obliterated.

Of course, we don't believe the lies, but their persistence and their sheer overwhelmingness wears us down and saps our spirits to where we give up in despair, withdraw into our cocoons, and become silent. Eventually, no one says anything anymore. And more and more of the dogs no longer bark and no one asks why?

The pastor of King's Chapel in Boston, the Rev. Carl Scovil, had an important article back in 1978 about how churches and pastors responded to the Nazis in the early years of the Nazi rise to power; in 1933 and 34 and 35. Scovil wrote, "A pastor's ability to oppose the state depended not so much upon his so-called courage, as upon his ability to perceive the issues at stake. The sin that preceded what we call cowardice was confusion. The virtue which preceded what we call courage was clarity" (*Katallegete*, Spring 1978, p. 35).

When we are overwhelmed with lies, falsehood, and propaganda, the eventual result is confusion. We don't know what to believe or whether to believe anything. Bill Moyers believed that his job, his vocation, his calling was to help us have the clarity to know the truth.

After leaving the White House, and before going to work for CBS and then for many years for Public Television, Bill was an editor in New York, but then he wrote, "For ten years I listened to America from a

distance. ... I wanted to hear people speak for themselves. In the summer of 1970, carrying a tape recorder and a notebook, I boarded a bus in New York to begin a journey of thirteen thousand miles through America.” The result was his first book, *Listening to America*, in which he simply listens to people across the country – in diners and cafes, sitting on buses, sitting in the stands of a high school football stadium, walking down the street, sitting in a park, and so on – he asked questions and listened to the answers.

Bill concludes his book with this, *There is a myth that the decent thing has almost always prevailed in America when the issues were clearly put to the people. It may not always happen. I found among people an impatience, an intemperance, an isolation which invites opportunists who promise too much and castigate too many. And I came back with questions. Can the country be wise if it hears no wisdom. ... Can those people I met escape their isolation if no one listens?*

I remember sitting in Moody Library at Baylor University in 1978 and reading these very words. I had checked out *Listening to America*, after growing up hearing Bill Moyers on television, I discovered this book and read it. His conclusion about listening to people stayed with me as I prepared for pastoral ministry.

Bill Moyers was a great listener. It was why he was considered one of the best journalists in the country at interviewing people. He knew how to

listen. He said toward the end of his career, “I want my epitaph to read, ‘He was a darned good listener.’”

Rooting our lives in the truth of the gospel of Christ, we can listen with the confidence that we will not be confused by all we hear. We can listen and discern where and how God speaks, where truth is at work, and where and how the people of God can make a difference for goodness, mercy, grace, truth, and justice.

Bill told me that one of his favorite interviews was the several he did over the years with Grace Lee Boggs, who was a great community organizer, activist, and writer in Detroit. I want to end with her advice to us, Austin Heights. She said in one of his interviews:

These are the times to grow our souls. Each of us is called upon to embrace the conviction that despite the powers and principalities bent on commodifying all our human relationships, we have the power [within us] to create the world anew.

We can begin by doing small things at the local level, like planting community gardens or looking out for our neighbors. That is how change takes place in living systems, not from above but from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously.

Actions like these seem insignificant because we judge progress in terms of quantity. But ... the time has come to rethink the way we think. ...

From a Newtonian perspective, our efforts often seem too small, and we doubt that our actions will contribute incrementally to large-scale change. But a quantum view explains the success of small efforts quite differently.”

[Remember that quantum field theory says that everything is connected. The universe is like a giant web. If you tug on one part of the web it ripples through the entire web.]

Grace Lee Boggs continues:

Acting locally allows us to be inside the movement and flow of the system, Changes in small places affect the global system, not through incrementalism, but because every small system participates in an unbroken wholeness. We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness. In this exquisitely connected world, it’s never a question of ‘critical mass.’ It’s always about critical connections.”

So, Austin Heights, we do not give up or give in. We keep on. We root ourselves deeply in the truth of the gospel of the living Christ and keep on. It’s always about critical connections.

As Bill Moyers said to me and to you: “You should know I take continuing strength from knowing you are still doing The Work and honoring The Call.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.