

John's Love Letters: Being the Truth
1 John 3:18-24; 2 John 4; Luke 24:44-53
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A car accident occurred in a small town. A crowd surrounded the victim so that a newspaper reporter couldn't manage to get close enough to see him. He hit upon an idea. "I'm the father of the victim!" he cried. "Please let me through."

The crowd let him pass so he was able to get right up to the scene of the accident and discover, to his embarrassment, that the victim was a donkey.¹

This story reminds us of the difficulty our culture seems to be having with truth-telling. We seem to be willing to lie in order to get what works to our advantage. Our culture has become preoccupied with protecting ego, power and privilege. We defend what isn't rather than build a history based on what is. The recent Enron trials and convictions are a prime example.

The American Dialect Society named the word *truthiness* as the Word of the Year for 2005. It was also recognized by *The New York Times* as one of nine words defining the spirit of the age. *Truthiness* has been around since the 19th century; contrary to public opinion, it was not invented by Stephen Colbert, host of Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report*. Colbert, however, did re-coin the term to spoof the way politicians and TV pundits insist that what they feel and want to be true must be treated as true, no matter what the evidence to the contrary. Truthiness is the notion that what "feels true" must be treated as true.

Rodney Clapp writes, "In a culture supersaturated with information, overwrought with shrill grabs at our attention, overstimulated by media of many kinds, none of us is immune to the allure of truthiness. Besides receiving the usual torrent of books, movies, radio voices, television shows, magazines and newspapers, modern searchers for truth must now take into account the World Wide Web, 24/7 news shows, 200-channel cable TV systems, videogaming, DVDs and iPods. It's tiring to keep up with even a few of these media. Our attention is stretched thin and largely confined to the surface. As we shoot the thundering, ever-rolling tube of hypermedia, we are often forced back on our intuition, on some reflexive sense of what 'feels true.'"

Clapp suggests that "it is the zeitgeist of truthiness that best accounts for the extraordinary success of [Dan Brown's] *The Da Vinci Code*....In a culture of truthiness, actual evidence or contrary details are readily ignored.

For most readers, the world of faith and the academic study of Christianity are as exotic as that of South Sea Islanders.”

“Dan Brown’s novel has played perfectly into a culture that stays close to the surface, to the cinematic, to the allure of truthiness. However much it consumes our attention at the moment, *The Da Vinci Code* is a sand castle on the beach, one that will soon erode and melt from view...The far more pressing challenge...is how the church can faithfully serve its mission of witnessing to enduring truth in a world more and more susceptible to truthiness.”²

The elder writing the letters of John is concerned that Christians of this community “walk in the truth.” Perhaps his community was subject to truthiness, to dwelling on the surface of things, content to give the appearance of following Christ, but not making a deep inner commitment which was displayed in one’s outward actions. Christianity was still a relatively new phenomenon and it was countercultural. It was a risky venture to claim the name of Jesus Christ and follow the radical values and ways of relating which he lived and taught. The author is saying that surface faith is not sufficient; one has to walk the walk and talk the talk.

We live in similar times. John was writing to a pre-Christendom society, before Christianity had become the major influence in western civilization. We live in the post-Christendom era, in which being a Christian or going to church is not the norm; oftentimes it is mocked or scorned. We live in an age in which “if it feels good, do it.” If we want something to be true, it is, regardless of facts to the contrary. The consequences of our actions upon our neighbor, let alone anyone in a third world country, don’t make any difference whatsoever. Personal satisfaction is the major criterion.

How do we as individual Christians and as the corporate body of Christ witness to the enduring truth of the gospel in a world in which truthiness and deceit have become commonplace? How can we walk in the truth without succumbing to the cunning influences of the culture? What would it be like to live a life of truth?

In his best-selling book of the 80’s, *The Road Less Traveled*, psychiatrist Scott Peck offers three ideas of what a life of total dedication to truth means. First, it means “a life of continuous and never-ending stringent self-examination. We know the world only through our relationship to it. Therefore, to know the world, we must not only examine it but we must simultaneously examine the examiner.”³ Such self-examination of naming and claiming the truth within us is painful but crucial to living a life of faith.

Self-examination and confession of sin is a foundational spiritual discipline for Christians. It is important for us to daily examine our lives

and see where we have “missed the mark” and fallen short of the calling of God. A searching and fearless moral inventory is one of the steps toward recovery in the twelve step movements. Only by self examination do we recognize our errors and amend our ways. We awaken to the truths upon which we have built our lives. We discover that we have choices about who we follow, where we put our money, what we do with our time, and more. Our choices, our truths, make us who we are.⁴

According to Peck, “A life of total dedication to the truth also means a life of willingness to be personally challenged. The only way we can be certain that our map or reality is valid to expose it to the criticism and challenge of other map-makers. Otherwise we live in a closed system which is subject to delusion....It is important that our maps of reality be truly open for inspection by the public.”⁵

When we claim to have arrived at the Truth with a capital T, we cheat ourselves. When we close ourselves off to interpretation, we shut ourselves off from further insights, inspirations, and illumination.

God continues to be at work in our world and in our lives. We must remain open for new truth to be revealed. We are confronting circumstances never before encountered in history. If we listen deeply, take time for silence, pay attention to our hearts, truths for the living of these days will be revealed by God.

Peck continues, “The third thing that a life of total dedication to the truth means is a life of total honesty. It means a continuous and never-ending process of self-monitoring to assure that our communications—not only the words that we say but also the way we say them—invariably reflect as accurately as humanly possible the truth or reality as we know it.”⁶

Several years ago at the National Spelling Bee in Washington D.C., in the fourth round of the contest Rosalie Elliot, an 11-year-old from South Carolina, drew the word “avowal.” In her soft, Southern accent she spelled it.

But did the seventh grader say an “a” or “e” as the next to the last letter? The judges couldn’t decide. They listened to tape recording playbacks, but the critical letter was accent-blurred.

Chief Judge John Lloyd finally put the question to the only person who knew the answer. “Was the letter an ‘a’ or an ‘e’?” he asked Rosalie Elliot. Surrounded by whispering young spellers, she knew by now the correct spelling of the word. Without hesitation, she replied that she had misspelled it.

She walked from the stage and the audience rose and gave her a standing ovation, including 50 newspaper reporters, one of whom was heard

to remark that Judge Lloyd *had put quite a burden* on an 11-year-old. Had he? Have we come to the point when honesty is a burden in our day? Do we need oaths to prove that we are telling the truth, or have oaths gone out of style with truth telling?⁷

Jesus said, “I tell you, on the day of judgment, people will render an account for every careless word they utter.” Solzhenitsyn, in his Nobel address declared, “One word of truth outweighs the whole world.”

A life of total dedication to the truth involves continuous self-examination, a willingness to be personally challenged, and a life of total honesty. Beyond knowing the truth is the dimension of living the truth, indeed of being the truth. The most convincing evidence of truth is found in the lives we lead. Our actions demonstrate the truth that lies within.

Jesus comes to testify to the truth within him, the Truth of God, God’s love, forgiveness, and justice. Being the truth for Jesus is not only a matter of teaching and confronting unjust authorities. His whole life—his healing, his attitudes toward the outcast and sinners, his acceptance of anyone whose mind and heart are open are reflections of the Truth within him, the Truth of God with a capital T.

Today Luke’s gospel tells us of Jesus’ ascension traditionally forty days after Jesus’ resurrection. He commissions his disciples to be witnesses of the words he has spoken, his ministry, life, death, and resurrection. They are witnesses to the Truth of God as revealed through Jesus. We inherit that mission, to be witnesses to the Truth, with a capital T. May we dare to go deep beyond the surface, not succumbing to the “feel good” truthiness of our culture. May we go deep into the Word of God, led by the Spirit of God, that we might discern the Truth of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. May we be bold to live that Truth in word and deed, to be the Truth of God.

¹ Anthony de Mello, S.J., *Taking Flight* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), pp. 189-190.

² Rodney Clapp, “”Dan Brown’s truthiness,” *The Christian Century*, May 16, 2006, pp. 22-25.

³ M. Scott Peck, M.D., *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), p. 51.

⁴ Esther Armstrong and Dale Stitt, *Journey Into Freedom*, August 2003.

⁵ Peck, pp. 52, 55.

⁶ Peck., p. 56.

⁷ Rev. Don Shelby, First United Methodist Church of Santa Monica, February 21, 1993.

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