

29 January 2017

The Truth Is . . . I Just Know
Galatians 1:6-12; Job 42:1-6

The Apostle Paul was a smart guy, and he spent most of his ministry in theological debate, trying to persuade people to believe in Christ. So you would expect him to have come to that faith himself through a rational consideration of the relevant facts, right? Not exactly. Listen to the following reading from his letter to the Galatians to see what changed his mind about this Jesus. We read Gal. 1:6-12:

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! ⁹As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

10 Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

11 For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹²for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

The book of Job is a book of arguments. Job questions traditional theology, and Job’s friends defend it in chorus. Their arguments mean nothing to Job. But then God appears in a whirlwind and speaks to Job in person. We read Job’s response in Job 42:1-6

42 *Then Job answered the Lord:*

*² ‘I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*

*³ “Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?”
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.*

*⁴ “Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me.”*

*⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;*

*⁶ therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.’*

All month I’ve been talking about Truth, in response to a growing sense that the word is losing its force, that “Truth” appears to mean nothing more than “anything I think.” So this past week has been interesting. I’ve gotten sermon illustrations enough from just this week to draw the series out for a year, if I wanted to. We’ve seen examples of blatant falsehood from political spokespersons, even from our president, justified by the introduction of the laughable-if-it-weren’t-so-scary term “alternative facts.” But it’s not just in politics where we find Truth being

redefined. We find it in the disregard of science by people across the political spectrum, people with no relevant scientific background rejecting this or that scientific consensus for no better reason than they don't happen to like it. There's a sense in nearly every area of our public lives that Truth is a personal decision. If I want something to be true, then I can just claim that it is and believe it. If I encounter evidence opposed to my "Truth," I can dismiss that evidence as biased. Evidence that supports my "Truth"? Now *that's* solid proof. Is there no evidence supporting my view? Just make it up. The point is, it's true *to me*. It seems we've elevated personal feelings to the level of proven fact and placed our own experience on the pedestal of Universal Truth.

It would be easy to get worked up about this approach to Truth, but before we do that, I need to say something important. Personal Experience *is* a valid way to seek Truth. In fact, there are some types of Truth that are best, or even *only*, known in this way. The best and most important example of this sort of Truth is the deep Truth of love. You can read books on love and conduct scientific surveys of lovers. You can even read what scripture says. But you can't understand love by any of those methods. Only by loving and being loved – in other words by personal experience – can you understand love even a little bit. A little bit may be all we ever grasp, in fact, but whatever the case, everything that we do understand about love we learned by experience.

This is true in more areas than just love, of course. Think about the most important life lessons you have learned, the things that you will never forget and that help to guide you today. Chances are, you didn't learn those things by reading them in a book or listening to a sermon or running a scientific experiment. Chances are, you learned those things through personal experience: an experience of grief or of danger, or an encounter with an inspiring person. And the things we learn by experience are also a kind of Truth. These are the things that shape our lives, after all. Are we really going to say that they aren't true? Maybe our problem is that we have for so long accepted the standards of science – observation, measurement, reproducible experiment – as being the only valid measures of Truth. What if, instead, our measure of Truth was "power to change lives and influence behavior"? If that were our measure – and why shouldn't it be? – then I'd think we'd all have to admit that love is *way* more true than algebra.

The Truth that is sought and discovered through experience is a peculiar sort, though, with unique limitations. For one thing, it isn't transferable. If you learn an algebraic concept, you can then theoretically explain it to others and share that knowledge. But if you fall in love with that cute guy in your English class, you can tell your friends about your love constantly (in fact, you might), but you won't make them love him as you do. Nor do you want that. Your experience is a sort of Truth that no one else can grasp entirely. This is why the Truth we learn by experience is impervious to argument. Back to that cute guy in your English class, your friends may tell you that he's wrong for you, that he's using you, that he's a jerk, and they may even have excellent evidence to support their point of view. But it won't matter. You cannot argue away an experience. The only thing that can change experiential knowledge is a new, and different, experience. When he deserts you at the dance and leaves with Jessica, for instance, then your Truth might be shaken. So this is a serious limitation of experience as a source of Truth, but at the same time, it is its great strength. We have greater certainty about what we have learned through experience than we have about anything.

Which is why this sort of Truth is so central to faith. How does Hebrews 11 put it? *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* From the perspective of science, that's nonsense. You're not supposed to have convictions of things you can't see. But in light of our discussion today, you see that this assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen isn't just air-dreaming. It's based on a different sort of evidence. It's based on experience. Back to our scriptures: let me talk about Paul. Paul was a foaming-at-the-mouth opponent of Christianity, and he became its greatest defender. How did this happen? He encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. He saw a light and heard a voice. Now – this is significant – he was traveling with others, but they didn't have the same experience. They heard something, or maybe saw something, but understood none of it. Only Paul knew that it was Jesus. But that was enough. Once you've had that encounter, you don't need independent corroboration. That's what lies behind our reading from Galatians. Before delving into his rational scriptural arguments, Paul says in essence, "People, you need to know that I didn't just think this stuff up. I didn't get at rabbinical school. Jesus spoke to me. It was real. I was there."

And then there's that powerful passage from the last chapter of Job. The background of that reading is this: Job was a righteous man to whom bad things happened. Traditional teaching said that that shouldn't happen; that if you were righteous, then you would be blessed. He had three friends who came to comfort him but when Job began questioning that traditional teaching about God, they felt they had to defend the tradition. So most of the book is the argument between Job and his friends. Nobody changes his mind. Rather everyone just gets angrier. By the end of their discussion, it's a shouting match, worse than an internet comments section. But then, in Job 38, God appears to Job and speaks to him out of a whirlwind. God's speech is brilliant, powerful, and is presented in some of the greatest poetry in world literature. But it doesn't answer any of Job's questions. It doesn't explain innocent suffering. This bothers some people. But it should not. This is a book about discovering faith, and faith does not come from explanations. Faith comes from experience. Job met God and in that encounter learned what mattered: God is, God is listening, God loves. And Job replies, *I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.* And that's enough.

All month we've been talking about "Truth." I may not have been very helpful to you, because what I've ended up saying is that there are different kinds of Truth, which must be sought and obtained by different methods. That sounds a little wishy-washy. We tend to think of "Truth" as being one ultimate reality. So maybe we should get away from the word Truth. Let's accept that there is an Ultimate Unchanging Truth, but then add to that that none of us is going to grasp that One Truth. Not in this life; maybe never. The best we can hope for is increasing knowledge of Truth, and can we agree at least that there *are* different kinds of knowledge, appropriate to different areas of life, obtained in different ways? We've talked about seeking knowledge through scripture, tradition, science and reason, and today, by personal experience. Each of these means of knowledge has its appropriate and inappropriate use. Take knowledge of the physical world. The Bible's not much help here; this isn't the kind of knowledge the Bible sets out to explore. For this kind of knowledge, go to science. If you want to treat cancer, don't go to scripture or tradition or personal experience, go to a doctor. If you want to deal with the question of global warming or figure out how many people attended an inauguration, don't consult your own feelings. Consult science. Look at photographs. That's how that sort of knowledge works. Here at church, though, we're particularly concerned with a different sort of

knowledge: knowledge of God. But science isn't much help here; this isn't the sort of knowledge science is concerned with. For knowledge of God, we can prepare ourselves by studying the inspired scriptures and by listening to the traditions of those who went before us, but ultimately this sort of knowledge must come by experience. We must meet God ourselves. Then ... then we shall know the Truth, and the Truth will set us free.

The Oxford professor Basil Mitchell told a parable one time. Imagine you're living in an occupied land. Your country has been taken over by a dictatorship. A resistance movement arises, and you meet the leader of the resistance movement. Because you've looked into his eyes, heard his voice, sensed his will, you join the resistance. Now over the course of the next few years, that resistance leader doesn't always do what you hope. Sometimes you don't understand what he thought he was doing. Some even begin to question whether he's really on the side of the resistance, or if he's secretly working for the dictator. And, taken just on the evidence, you can see their point. But you don't doubt him. Because you've met him. You know him. You believe in him.

Sometimes faith in Christ is like that. Sometimes the evidence looks bad. Sometimes all we have to hold on to is the fact that we've met him. But if you have, that's enough.