

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – June 16, 2019 – “We Hold These Truths”
Romans 5:1-5 and John 16:12-15**

On July 4, 1776, the unanimous Declaration of the thirteen United States of America read as follows: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹ This is powerful and moving language, to be sure. And yet, despite the soaring rhetoric that all men are created equal and that this truth is self-evident, many disparities existed at the time these words were written.

Women, for example, are not even acknowledged in this document, which was penned by land owning men of European descent. Next, as the Constitution was ratified, the so called self-evident truth of equality quickly melted away when only some were granted the right to vote, while others accounted for less than full personhood. My point is that while we may wish that truth was, indeed, self evident, it rarely is. And while much has changed - often for the better - since the 18th century, we seem mired in yet another round of so-called self evident truths that are

¹ <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>. Accessed on June 11, 2019.

really more in keeping with opinion than with the timeless nature of actual truth claims.

In recent memory, phrases such as “fake news” and “alternative facts” have taken center stage in the public discourse. These concepts are a daily reminder that our society is struggling mightily with the truth. Part of this struggle, to be sure, is rooted in the growing embrace of relativism, in which each person is granted the ability to determine for themselves what is true and what is not. In such a society, a myriad of ideas, both true and untrue, are granted equal value. When this happens, truth itself becomes universal as many reason that one belief is just as valid as any other.

I certainly understand the pendulum shift. After years of feeling silenced in public spaces, many are longing for an equal seat at the table. To have their voices heard. To make an impact on policy. To draft legislation. To govern. Or, perhaps, simply to be heard by others on social media. To make “my truth” known.

The logic behind this trend is commendable. And I am in no way suggesting that voices long silenced ought to be pushed to the margins once again. Instead, it is my belief that not all who have something to say are equally capable of speaking the

truth. And that truth, rather than being self-evident, is more in keeping with a process of discernment – a way of being in relationship, made known in the triune God who creates, redeems, and sustains us. For Christians, if another’s “truth” does not pass Christ’s test to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself, then it really isn’t truth at all.

And friends, it is here, reflecting on the nature of truth, both personal and corporate, that emerges the current debate regarding facts and values. As one scholar notes, the prevailing view dictates that “scientifically established facts are appropriate to public knowledge and action,” while “values lie in the realm of private belief and opinion. In such a world, Christian belief in the one who is acclaimed to be Lord of all things faces a dilemma. Can Christ’s lordship be believed to be a fact touching the life of the world, or must it be accepted that such a belief belongs to the realm of private values?”²

In a world of both facts and values, some truth can certainly be proven scientifically. But, I am equally convinced that other truth claims, though they may never be proven, are no less grounded in the truth. In a society in which logic

² George R. Hunsberger, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 3*, Ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press: 2019), 16.

prevails, many pride themselves on formal education which informs one's ability to reason and think critically. And yet, the quality of one's training does not determine the truthfulness of one's utterances. We all recognize, for example, that the lives of the highly educated can be completely devoid of love, while those with little or no formal training are capable of living into the image of God because they have attuned their lives to the Spirit of truth.

Easter is now fading into the distance. The community that John addressed in his gospel was struggling with the same crisis as all the rest. When Jesus departed, the community felt orphaned. They were "experiencing absence, longing for presence, for clarity, for truth."³ As David Jacobsen writes, "the Spirit of truth comes, not to sanction new truth for new times," but for interpreting truth in ever new contexts "as an expression of communion that continues *despite* the absence, the loss, and being orphaned yet again."⁴

When I was a young child, my best friend was a Hindu boy of Indian descent. Over the years, I spent countless hours with his family, developing a deep love and

³ David Schnasa Jacobsen, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 3*, Ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press: 2019), 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

appreciation for everyone in his home. Then, as now, I have no interest in judging them. They are wonderful people who have shared the beauty of their lives with me.

As a pastor, people often say to me that they do not adhere to a particular religious tradition. “After all,” they tell me, “I find truth in every religious expression.” The way that I approach this in my own life is to acknowledge truth with a small “t” in a variety of different places, while maintaining that Truth, with a capital “T” is to be found in the work of the triune God. And now, post-Easter, that Spirit of truth will lead us on. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.