



Great Ends of the Church #4

Preservation of the Truth

1 Corinthians 13:8b-13
John 14:1-7; 15-17

Larry DeLong
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So you came to church one Sunday, heard a terrific sermon, and then started talking about it at lunch, only to discover your luncheon companions, who sat in worship right near you or even next to you, heard what was said somewhat differently, even something else entirely.

Remember that game where you sit in a big circle, and one person whispers a phrase into another's ear, who then whispers it into the next person...and after you go all the way around, you compare notes?

Then there's what kids think they hear, giving us hymn titles like "Gladly, the Cross-Eyed Bear" and characters like Round John Virgin.

And we've all gotten very exercised over a newspaper report that's completely off-the-mark, we think.

What do these things have to do with the truth?

Truth is more than just facts. A fact may be true, but you have to put in context with other facts to give it meaning. The farther away we move from simply describing something, the more interpretation takes place, and the greater likelihood that our understanding of those facts will differ. As a freshman in college, my first history professor, Peter Marcy, took us straight down the path to utter confusion (before leading us back to sanity) by making us consider whether there can be such a thing as objective history: is it possible to have an unbiased analysis and description of an historical event? The quick answer is, no.

Observing any given event, everyone sees a different part of the whole thing. Each person has a slightly different perspective. Then, each observer puts that part together with other parts in different ways. The "facts" are out there, but which ones are important and which are just there, and how they all interrelate, means we all see things at least a little bit differently.

Now, this “softness,” this uncertainty over precisely what facts mean, isn’t usually that much of a problem, as long as we understand that there is an issue. We can make allowances for others’ interpretations – they may even give us new insights.

Then, the question is truth. What is truth? Sounds like Pilate’s question to Jesus: “What is truth?” There *is* truth. Truth is what really is, without interpretation. It’s how we humans perceive and interpret truth that gets us in trouble.

Take a rock like this one. Nothing special about it; fact, it’s a rock. To you, it is: to my son Seth, it’s much more. He found it on the way to the ball field, and it became *his* rock, probably its first “owner.” Then he put it in his pocket; it was there when he made his big play at third base; it decorates his window ledge. This rock is *special*. It has become evocative, it has meaning, it reminds him of something. It’s a souvenir – a word which means “already seen.” The truth, for my son, is that this is a memory-rock. But *we* don’t see that unless we know what he knows.

There are examples like this in Scripture. An obvious one is in First Samuel 7: a rock that the prophet Samuel set in the desert to commemorate God’s help in the Israelites’ defeat of the Philistine army. Samuel called it Ebenezer, which means “Rock of Help.” Just a rock, to most people; a mighty monument to God, in the history of God’s people. The bare fact of its existence doesn’t tell the whole truth about it: it’s how that existence became a part of our history that gives it meaning.

Let’s look at this another way. A master artist has a vision for a sculpture, and using all the skills at her disposal, creates a work of art. Right away there’s a problem, because the creation won’t be a perfect embodiment of her original vision – it will always be just a bit off, one degree of separation away.

The artist is trying to express that vision, and may do it superbly in her sculpture – but it won’t be the vision, no matter what, because the work of art is an object, and the vision isn’t. The sculpture may capture the vision exquisitely well – but it will never *be* the vision.

Now, let’s say that sculpture becomes famous, and is copied over and over. Each of those copies is a little bit removed from the original, and yet another degree of separation from the artist’s true original, the vision. Every person who looks at the sculpture, who looks at the copies, sees something different – and perhaps can even see something beyond the sculpture itself, a glimpse of the artist’s vision.

So, once again, what is truth? Better, what is The Truth? This is where God takes center stage, because everything that is, began in God. If Truth is what really is, then truth is wrapped up in God. But we don’t see the truth because we don’t see God. As Christians, we understand that God created everything through the Word, which we know in human form as Jesus Christ. In Genesis, God spoke, and things came into being; in the first chapter of John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...Through him all things were made, and without him nothing was made that has been made.” So truth, what is really real, is God.

We mustn't get caught in thinking that the creation is the creator. The sculpture is not the artist; it's an expression of the artist. Or that if we change the creation, the vision will change too: they are not the same, and the vision does not change.

The worst thing you can do to anything that has to do with God is try to fix it in time and space. The moment you attempt to contain God, put limits on God, you lose something of what God is, you move away from the truth. God will always surprise us with something new to us, and there's more to God than we can know.

This is what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 13. "We know only a portion of the truth, and what we say about God is always incomplete." (v. 10) Even the best and smartest and most gifted among us can only catch the outlines of truth, "squinting in a fog, peering through a mist."

What the Church is called to do is preserve the truth, not pickle it. And here's a place where language is our friend: one of the definitions of "preserve" in library language is "to maintain or restore access to" something. That is precisely what the Church strives to do: to keep the lines open so that we can continue to be in communion with God, and work to restore access to God for those who have lost it. The Church, God's people, listening to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, are to continually struggle with the meaning of the truth, because we, being human, will see it differently at different times and places.

As anyone who has found new inspiration in places of the Bible that you've studied many times knows, God shows us new things as God's gifts to us mature in us.

The Preservation of the Truth is pointing to God in all things, at all times, letting that truth make its life in us – in Peterson's wonderful rendering of John 14:23: "If anyone loves me," says Jesus, "he will carefully keep my word and my Father will love him – we'll move right into the neighborhood."

There will always be tension between where we have been, where we are now, and where we are going. There will always be debate and questioning of choices made long ago, and different ideas on how to step into what God and Christ are doing right now. Pushing back on what was once thought to be true, like the flat earth, adding new understanding to what we think we know, and watching what Christ is doing among us here and now have to be a part of how we handle, how we preserve the truth as a Church.

We will never in this life articulate the whole truth. But we know where it is, and we keep on pointing to it, reminding ourselves of it and helping others to see it for themselves, looking for the day when, as Paul says, "We'll see it all, see it all as clearly as God sees us...But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of these is love."