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“Preservation of the Truth: Easier Said Than Done”  
Based on Matthew 15: 10-28 and Great Ends of the Church  
by Rev. Meghan Davis, Longview Presbyterian Church  
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*An English woman “worked on the ward of a children’s hospital. She found life futile and meaningless, and she struggled to find joy. She waded through book after book and philosophy after philosophy in an attempt to find peace, all to no avail. But she had never read the Bible, because a friend had convinced her it was full of errors and could not be true.*

*“One day, a visitor came to the ward with copies of the Gospel of John, and she persuaded the woman to read a copy. Later, the woman said, ‘It shone and glowed with truth, and my whole being responded to it.’ The words that finally changed her mind were Jesus’ words to Pilate, ‘For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’ She listened to that voice, she heard the truth, and she found her Savior.”<sup>1</sup>*

In that same conversation Pilate asks Jesus the question: what is truth? It’s a good question. It’s a tough question. What *is* truth?

Preservation of the Truth. The fourth and—perhaps most difficult to grasp—of the Great Ends of the Church. It contains only four words but raises so many questions. First of all, what is the Truth? Secondly, once we’ve figured that out, we need to determine how to preserve it.

In our classes this week, I posed the question: if a stranger were to stop you on the street and ask, “what is the truth?” how would you respond? The question was met mostly with silence, though there were some responses. Some answered along these lines, “Truth is what you think it is.” In our postmodern age, we are not comfortable with the idea of definitive truth; but if truth is only what we think it is, then there is no such thing as “*the* Truth” and what are we all doing here? Literally. What are we doing sitting in this sanctuary if there is no such thing as *the* Truth? Some answered that “reality is truth;” but “reality” is just as subjective as “truth” which points us back to the negation of the existence of *the* Truth. But most of us had to admit, we probably wouldn’t be able to answer the question. Certainly not before the helpful reminder from John’s gospel that Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” Ah yes, Jesus Christ is the Truth... But would that be the first thing to come into your brain if someone asked out of the blue, “What is the truth?” (Hopefully it will be from now on!)

What is truth? Frederick Buechner suggests that perhaps Pilate asked the question, “because in a world of many truths and half truths, he is hungry for truth itself

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<sup>1</sup> A. M. Chirgwin story paraphrased by Peter B. Barnes, “A Passion for Truth” in *Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church*, Joseph Small, ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2010), 89-90.

or, failing that, at least for the truth that there is no truth.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps we, like Pilate, wonder “what is truth.” Perhaps we hide behind the postmodern notion that “truth is what you think it is” because we are wary of identifying the Truth only to find out we’re wrong. Perhaps we are wary of identifying the Truth because we don’t want to seem like arrogant know-it-alls. Or because we don’t want to be lumped together with those who think there are easy answers; all there in black and white.

Whatever the cause of our reluctance to identify *the* Truth, probably the only truths that (most of us) can agree on as a society, are scientific. We can all agree that gravity is real. If I hold my hand out and let go of a pencil, it will fall to the floor. But scientific truths, are not Truth. Scientific truths are facts. Even some prominent scientists themselves have been adamant that scientific facts alone will not satisfy our yearning for Truth. Blaise Pascal, the French physicist and philosopher noted, “Physical science will not console me for the ignorance of morality in the time of affliction. But a science of ethics will always console me for the ignorance of the physical science.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, science cannot fill the gaps of theology, but theology can fill the gaps of science.

So there is a difference between truth and fact. If you want to see steam come out of an English teacher’s ears, define “fiction” as “something that’s not true.” While fiction is usually about people and/or situations that are not factual, fiction—at least good fiction—is always true. Huckleberry Finn was not a real person who lived and breathed and floated down the Mississippi River on a raft. The characters and events in the novel were manufactured in the mind of Mark Twain. Yet the novel is true. It is full of truth.

And this difference between fact and truth is particularly crucial when it comes to Biblical interpretation. The Bible is a book of truths. Scripture reveals *the* Truth. But the Bible is not a book of facts. Sure, there are facts contained in the Bible, but not everything in the Bible is fact. History books are factually based. Science books are factually based. The Bible is based on the Truth: Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, the Life. The Bible is based on the Truth that God is Love.

So there are truths and there is *the* Truth. Small “t” truths may or may not be part of the big “T” Truth. Small “t” truth: I brushed my teeth this morning. Probably not an aspect of the “Truth.” But any truth that reveals something about God, God’s Reign, our relationship with God or the response to which God calls us, is part of *the* Truth.

In today’s scriptures, we see examples of truths illuminating the Truth. In the scripture Jon read from Genesis, Joseph reveals the truth of his identity to his brothers, but in doing so, he also reveals a truth about *the* Truth, about God’s mercy and forgiveness and providence.

In the first part of our gospel passage, Jesus reveals a truth about the Truth. Jesus says, “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.... whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer... But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Penses* #67.

hands does not defile.” Actions alone are not what determine our relationship with God. Actions and speech that proceed from a righteous heart, from good intentions are what matters with God. Jesus says, we cannot be defiled by what we eat or how we eat; the food we eat goes in one end and out the other (clearly he was eating a low fat diet and/or had a high metabolism because a lot of what I eat goes straight to the hips and stays there...). But while food comes and goes, our *heart* is here to stay. All that we say and do proceed from our heart.

Interestingly, the next thing Jesus does is among the most... well, unkind things he does in all the gospels. Jesus doesn't behave the way we expect him to behave. He doesn't treat the woman the way we'd like him to. This passage is messy. But that's ok. Life is messy. Faith is messy. There are no easy answers.

A Canaanite woman shouts out to him, pleading, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” Her behavior unacceptable. Violating all cultural norms. Embarrassing everyone. And then there's the demon. Like any disease, yet perhaps even more than other ailments, demon possession was seen as an indication of bad morals and failure of character. The woman has three strikes against her because she is: a woman, a Canaanite, and she's talking about demons possession. Add onto that the fact that she's yelling and making a spectacle and why on earth would Jesus stoop to speak to her? Why indeed. Jesus gets “caught with his compassion down.”<sup>4</sup>

In fact, he is down right rude. Jesus: fully human, fully divine. But the human part seems to be overshadowing the divine here... At first he ignores her. And that's the polite part. Next, when the disciples tell Jesus to send her away because she keeps shouting after them (undoubtedly they found her behavior both irritating and embarrassing) he tells her he's only there to help the Israelites. Undeterred by Jesus' refusal, the woman throws herself at his feet, kneeling before him saying, “Lord, help me.” These are almost the exact same words Peter spoke just a few verses earlier when his attempt to walk on water failed but while Jesus stretched out his hand to help Peter, here Jesus says, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” The final insult: he basically calls her a dog. Make no mistake about it, calling someone a female dog in Jesus' time meant essentially the same thing it does now and was a slur commonly used by Jews for Canaanites. There's no sugar-coating it. It was an insult. It seems that these words could even be an example of words that defile which Jesus was just talking about. But the woman—knowing her daughter's life is at risk—will not take “no” for an answer. She persists saying, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” Using Jesus' metaphor, the woman reminds Jesus that God's mercy knows no bounds.

And finally, something clicks. Finally, Jesus realizes that the Good News might not be only for the children of Israel. As Barbara Brown Taylor explains, “The line [Jesus] had drawn between him and the woman disappears; the limits he had place on himself vanish, and you can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do. He is no longer a

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<sup>4</sup> Attributed to “some commentators” by Iwan Russell-Jones, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 358.

Messiah called only to the lost sheep of Israel, but God’s chosen redeemer of the whole world, Jews and gentiles alike, beginning with this Canaanite woman.”

Jesus recognizes the woman’s humility and persistence as faith. He says, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly. Through her persistence, through her faith, the woman teaches Jesus a truth about *the* Truth. She teaches him that, “While mercy may begin with Israel, she knows it cannot end there, because of the very nature of Israel’s God. It overflows to others in the house—even to the ‘dogs.’”<sup>5</sup> Jesus learns from the woman’s faith. She is the only character in Matthew—perhaps the only in any of the gospels—to win a theological argument with Jesus. And “Jesus is big enough not to be ashamed to learn something for a Gentile Canaanite woman.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps that is where the “fully divine” comes in...

In our classes this week we read, “The fourth Great End of the Church—the preservation of the truth—is the church’s calling to preserve the gospel of Jesus Christ, holding fast to *the way, the truth, the life*. Thus, the church is not called to protect a specific body of dogmatic formulations or to impose rigid tests of doctrinal purity. The church is called to preserve faith in the truth to which Christ bore witness, the truth that Christ is, and the Spirit of truth that abides with us. Truth is the shape of our relationship with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> What is the Truth? It is as easy as “Jesus Christ is the Truth.” What is the Truth? It is as complicated “Jesus Christ is the Truth.” It is as complicated as figuring out what that means. How do we preserve the Truth? Preservation of the Truth is not a static once and for all task that we can do then mark is off our to-do list. Preservation of the Truth begins with the simple recognition that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life and it continues in the life-long endeavor of seeking to better know the Truth, seeking to grow in the Truth, seeking to enrich our relationship with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>5</sup> Iwan Russell-Jones, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 360.

<sup>6</sup> Jae Won Lee, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 361.

<sup>7</sup> Frank T. Hainer and Joseph D. Small, *Short-Term Study Course for Adults Revised Edition*, (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 2003), 18.