Sunday, September 23, 1973
WHAT IS TRUTH?
John 18:33-38, 14:6-7

What is truth? The question of truth is universally human. The truth we first receive as children is ‘mostly imposed upon us by adults, by our parents and by the world around us. And it cannot be otherwise in our early years.

Then as we grow older, we often revolt against the truth which has been given us. We often deny the authorities either all together or one in the name of the other. We may use teachers against parents, the gang against the teachers, or a friend against the gang.

As we grow older our passion for truth may die down and then grow strong again, but in one way or another the search for truth is with us all of our lives. Sometimes we fool ourselves into believing that we have and know the truth and at other times we are just a bundle of doubts. And who among us knows the complete truth about anything?

Thus, the question which Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” is an eternal question. People spend their lives searching for the truth. All science is in a sense the search for truth as we human beings seek to learn about the nature and structure of the universe.

But we don’t have to be scientists or theologians or philosophers to be searchers for truth. All persons whether they know it or not, or admit it or not, seek to find some meaning in their living, seek to make some sense out of life. This is another way of saying that all persons seek to find the truth or a part of the truth.

A person becomes seriously ill and asks, “Why did this happen to me?” He is asking a deeply philosophical and religious question. He is asking what is the truth about illness and accidents and tragedies?

To say that we all search for truth is also to say that everybody doubts--skeptic and believer, pulpit and pew. To doubt is to ask, “what is truth?”

What is truth? This question is even a one more burning our time than in previous generations. This is so because all things are changing so rapidly. All sorts of things we once believed to be true forever are now being challenged and questioned at every turn. People ask -- “How can we believe in anything?” Or a sharper question--"How can we believe in a God who cares?” “Is there anything which is eternally true?”

In this tension between doubt and truth and where the truth seems hard to come by, we respond in one of several ways. Some want to give in too easily and thus often buy some kind of truth or what they consider the truth, cheaply. People will blindly follow all sorts of fads and pseudo-religions. We do this because we want to alleviate our anxiety about the truth. It’s difficult to live in a world where nothing seems to be nailed down and everything is brought into question. We may therefore accept something as being the truth too quickly.

And there are always those around who claim to have the truth and are glad to sell it to us. Th. are very sure about what is the truth — too sure. Everything is seen as b1ack or white. What is the 1 cause of the world’s ills today? Some of the easy truth sellers answer quickly --"Communism.” Others of the easy truth sellers give another pat answer. They claim to have all

the truth. Sign up with us and get all our questions answered satisfactorily. Then you need not wonder about the question, what is truth.

This is the nature of every extremist group, every fanatical sect — a claim to have all the truth. Those who shouted to Pilate, “Give us Barabbas, crucify Jesus, were of this kind.” We know the truth, don’t confuse us with questions. Many are seduced into following such groups in an attempt to relieve their own anxiety about what is the truth. To accept something as the truth blindly, fanatically, with no doubt at all, is really an attempt to evade the search for truth.

What is truth? All of this is to say that the truth is not a thing, not a doctrine or a set of doctrines, not a belief or a set of beliefs. These may point to the truth but are not the truth in themselves.

Jesus Christ is a help of all of us here. He said, “I am the truth.” And when Jesus says, “I am the truth,” he indicates that in him the true, the genuine, the ultimate reality is present; or in other words, that God is present, unveiled, undistorted. “He who believes in me, believes not in me, but in him who sent me.”

But it is difficult for our age, weaned on scientific method to find any special revelation in Jesus. Why, we ask, should God reveal the truth through one man in an ancient time in an inconsequential land?

Yet is not disclosure, even in science, always particular? The truth about life, about God, about the universe, is not something abstract, removed; rather it comes to us in the particular, in events, in fragments.

Furthermore, we see the truth in Jesus because his words and his person and his actions coincide.

We’ve often used or heard the cliche — "What you are doing speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you are saying.“ Or to paraphrase, “What you are doing cancels out the supposed truth of what you are saying.”

A friend of mine told me of his experience in Brazil. He went to a public square in a city to see the people who gather there. The language spoken was Portuguese and thus he had to use a translator. In the public square he listened to a street preacher. As he walked away with his translator, he asked him what the preacher’s theme was, and he was told, “The Love of God.” But my friend said that was not the message he received, and the translator expressed surprise that he had understood anything at all, not knowing the language. But my friend had received the message of anger and hostility. The preacher articulated it through his facial expressions, gestures, and other physical movements.

His face was contorted with hatred. His favorite gesture was the angry shaking of his clenched fist, and his body maintained a crouched position as if he were about to pounce on his victims. He was frightening and all the more so when my friend learned he was talking about love.

Now our negative nonverbal gestures may not always be as naked or crude as were that street preachers because we learn to clothe our emotions with words and feigned gestures. But the lurks behind our disguises often betray us unknowingly.

How does this fit in with the question — "What is truth?" Jesus said, “I am the truth,” and he was, and this was one way he was the truth. There was a correlation between what he said and how he said it and what he was and. how he lived. He was the truth and people upon meeting him sensed this. Again, Jesus was also saying that the truth is never found simply in words, in rules, in laws, in doctrines. All of these can point to the truth. Truth is always embodied in the whole person and in particular events and actions. It is always dynamic, never abstract or static. It is to be found and experienced in our relationships with others and in our relationship with God.

But now let’s move on to a further question about truth and talk more specifically about “telling the truth.”

What does “telling the truth” consist of? This is a seemingly simple question, but there is no simple answer. This is why parents and educators generally have such a hard time explaining lies and truth to children.

In the introduction to her autobiography, “Journey from the North,” Storm Jameson, the novelist, writes: “I am an accomplished professional novelist, and nothing would have been easier for me than to draw a self-portrait which without telling a single lie, would be dishonest from beginning to end, intelligent, charming, interesting — and a lie.”

On the surface, a “lie” is a statement that does not correspond to fact, or to what we believe to be a fact. But “facts” and “truth” are by no means the same thing; as Miss Jameson reminds us, a book of memoirs can be absolutely truthful in its facts and yet be a total lie.

Truth is the inner spirit of a statement, not just its outer shell of facts. Part of the problem all of us have had with the Watergate testimony is that the witnesses may technically telling the truth, but in fact living a lie. There is a way to know and not technically know.

Of course, if facts are falsified, the inner spirit is injured; but the opposite does not hold — a report consisting of nothing, but facts can be totally dishonest in its intent and effect.

And it’s even more complicated than this — this business of telling the truth. Must one always tell the absolute truth? Or may one occasionally lie? In today’s world, we know that lying has become almost our flesh and blood. A person lies for his position, his peace, his good name, his income, and his property. The government lies to us in the name of national security. There is a new book out entitled, “Government by lies,” in which the author traces the history of our government’s lies over the past 20 years. The headline article in this week’s NATIONAL OBSERVOR newspaper is “To Lie is a Verb and Also a Lifestyle.”

I read of a firm that offered to supply 600-word themes for 50 cents to 8th graders who couldn’t find time to write them themselves. One topic: “To thine own self be true.” For $2 you could purchase 2,000 words on truth.

But again, what does it mean to speak the truth and to do the truth, to be true to the inner spirit of truth.

In one of Bonhoeffer’s last unfinished essays, he takes up the subject of the “always truthful person” and reminds us that there are evil truths as well as necessary and heal-ing truths. The person who always says what he thinks under the guise of “candor” is not living in the spirit of truth, but, in the spirit of hate.

He gives an example to show the difficulty. A teacher asks a child in front of the class whether his father came home drunk in the evenings. The father often did. But was the student in his rights in denying it? Has he lied? Or is it possible that the teacher had not respected the sanctity of the family and has brought the child into a situation to which he is not equal?

There is an inner relationship of trust between parent and child with a truth of its own and which is the secret of the family. There is another kind of truth which a pupil owes his teacher, and the teacher owes his pupil.

And what truth does the doctor owe the patient who is on his deathbed? Should he always tell him what people call the truth or not? Is there always only one right answer to this question?

Are you responsible for the truth toward those who want to cause your downfall by using your words and utterances to ruin you? Or has your opponent already removed the claims of c9mmunity between you by his purpose, thus giving you the freedom to deceive him? If you had been a Jew living in Germany, in the late 1930's would you be obliged to tell the truth to a Nazi official if he asked you if you were a Jew, knowing that if you answered truthfully, you might be put to death or sent away?

What is truth is such a situation? To tell the truth might be to act irresponsibly toward a person's family, and others around him.

And then there is the problem of truth for journalists, salesman, politicians and their counterparts, newspaper readers, customers and many more. Does the manufacturer of a product like cigarettes have the responsibility to tell the consumer what the consequences of using the product might be? Truth in advertising! Truth in lending!

Sometimes we are pleasantly surprised when someone is refreshingly truthful. A number of years ago, David Merrick, the Broadway producer announced that he was closing his trouble-plagues new show, BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S. He made the announcement 12 days before its Broadway opening despite an advance sale of nearly one million dollars. He said, "I have decided to close the show to avoid subjecting the drama critics and the theatergoing public to an excruciatingly boring evening. Since the idea for the show was mine in the first place, the closing is entirely my fault and should not be attributed to the writers."

Here for one was a stylish exit. No equivocations, no excuses, no banal platitudes, not very many words at all. What made it especially refreshing was that Merrick acted without being forced to.

What is truth? There is no simple answer. We most often begin to find the truth in loving relationships one with the other. We are on the way to discovering the truth in any situation when we seek it in company with others and are willing to have our ideas, actions and attitudes tested and revised.

Furthermore, it is the message of Christianity that in the person of Christ, truth has made its home among us. Jesus lived the truth by lovingly accepting all persons, by forgiving the godless and the sinners. He prays for those who nail him to the cross and promises paradise to the hanged murderer. He makes Peter who denied him the founder of the church and he makes Saul, the persecutor of Christianity into the Apostle for all nations. Jesus who is

rejected does not reject us. This is the truth that makes us free. When we do the same, we are doing the truth.

From our Christian point of view, the way to be truthful to others is through love. Thus, in the earlier example from Bonhoeffer, the teacher in the classroom would've served the truth best if she had not asked the child in front of the class whether or not his father was a drunkard.

When we are speaking of truth, there is a time to speak and a time to be silent. And the truth demanded of us at any particular hour can take different forms. Truth that knows that the hour for speaking has not yet come or is already past can remain in silence. Thus, Jesus remained silent before Herod and at times before Pontius Pilate. We have to always ask — in what way can we serve the truth best and to whom do we owe the truth.

We are finite creatures and, in this life, will never know all the truth. There is always mystery within this life and beyond us, and yet we are called to continue to seek the truth and always with humility. Amen.