Sunday, October 19, 1980
WHAT IS TRUTH?
John 18:33-38, 14:6-7

People asked Jesus all kinds of questions. Some were very detailed, and others more philosophical. One of the most intriguing questions was asked by Pontius Pilate during his examination of Jesus. He asked, “What is truth?”

It’s a universal and eternal question. People spend their lives searching for truth. All learning is in a sense the search for truth as we human beings seek to gain more knowledge about the nature and structure of creation.

And we don’t have to be scientists or theologians, or professional students, 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 ma.ke some sense out of life. This is another way of saying that people seek to find the truth or a part of the truth.

Pi person becomes seriously ill and asks, “What is the meaning of this illness?” or “Why did this happen to me?” Such an individual is asking a deep philosophical and religious question. He or she is asking, “What is the truth about illness and accidents and tragedy?”

Ironically at the same time we all search for truth in one way or another, we are always tempted to evade the burden of asking for the truth that matters. And sometimes we don’t even want to know the truth because it’s too disturbing or upsetting.

Some of us evade the burden of looking for truth by believing that we already have all the truth and do not need to be concerned about any new truth. Jesus continually dealt with people like that. These people pointed to their tradition all the way back to Abraham and implied that they already knew all there was to know.

There are people today who firmly believe they have all the truth they need and don’t want to be disturbed with any new ideas or theories or evidence. There are those who approach the Bible that way.

Others avoid the question of truth by not caring very much about it, by indifference. Life, they say to themselves, is a mixture of truth, half-truth, and falsehood. It’s difficult to believe in anything, and so such people muddle through life without asking the questions of truth which matter ultimately.

“What is truth?” Perhaps Pilate asked this question in a mood of cynicism and despair. But no matter what his meaning behind the question, it’s an important question in each generation and an even more burning question in our own time. 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. We wonder now, is there anything which is eternally true?

Because the world seems to be more and more complex and the truth elusive; some want to give in too easily and thus often settle too quickly for simple answers. So, individuals will blindly follow all sorts of religious and political fads. They do this in an attempt to alleviate their anxiety about the truth. And half-truths sound so good and so logical.

And there are always those around who are glad to supply us with simple answers. They are very sure about what is the truth — too sure. Everything is seen as black or white. “Sign up with us and get all your questions answered satisfactorily. We have the truth, and we’ll give it to you.”

This is the claim of every extremist group, every fanatical sect — a claim to have all the truth. “We know all the truth,” is their motto.

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. All these may point to the truth but are not the whole truth in themselves.

Jesus Christ is not the truth because his teachings are true. But His teachings are true because they express the truth which He Himself is. The truth is more than the words of Christ. And He is more than any word said about him. That’s why Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. Unfortunately, the church has often forgotten the words· of Jesus that He is the truth and has claimed that her doctrines about Him are the truth. But these doctrines, however necessary and good, only point toward the truth. When we make the doctrines themselves the truth then they often become tools of suppression, of servitude under authorities and they can even become weapons to prevent the honest search for truth.

What is truth? Here are some tests one can apply which help us search for and recognize that which is on the way to truth, whether in religion, science, politics, economics, etc.

1. First, truth as we perceive it is always open, expanding, and evolving. Therefore, our perception of the truth is always partial, and our perception and understanding of what is truth will change and grow. Some years ago, it was our perception that the world was flat and that the whole universe revolved around the earth. Later we discovered that our perception of the truth was not correct.

Years ago, many believed that a woman was only meant to be a wife and mother, but now we are learning that such is not the whole truth.

This last week the Nobel prize in physics was awarded to two American physicists whose findings show that the universe is not symmetrical, a place of balance and proportion, as we have for many years believed. A cherished physical law was overthrown, according to one physicist.

Val L Fitch, and James Cronin won the prize for their discovery of a basic asymn1etry in the decay of subatomic particles. Incidentally, Mr. Fitch is a native of Merriman Nebraska and a graduate of Gordon Nebraska High School.

Our ancestors in the Congregational Church were people who were always open to new truth. As Pastor John Robinson so aptly put it, “There is more truth yet to break forth from God’s word.”

God’s revelation to us is not static but continues. God therefore calls us to be individuals who are not afraid of new truth.

It is said that Galileo, who was summoned to the Inquisition in Rome and took that very seriously, at times showed his telescope to the leading sages of the day. The result generally

fell into three categories of response. Some were properly struck by what they saw, and some peered around at the other end of the instrument, convinced that Galileo had pasted something on the glass — the picture of a planet, the moon, whatever. But it is the third group that will interest us the most — this group refused to look through the lens. They didn't want to see anything; they didn't want to entertain any possibilities at all. That's how frightened they were. Of what? Of having their old beliefs challenged. Of the truth. They were afraid of the perception of the possibility of truth.

I know people who are afraid of any new truth about the Bible, or about Jesus Christ, or about God, or about people. But there is yet more truth to break forth from God's word.

2. A second point about searching for truth is to not be afraid to test what is supposed to be the truth. Do not be afraid to look through the telescope. Do not be afraid of the latest scholarship concerning the Bible and its development. Testing the truth means being beware of simple answers. It means not being afraid to examine our basic assumptions as I mentioned in a sermon a few weeks ago. Every major advance in the history of civilization has come about because of people not being afraid to test what others believed to be true.

But why are some of us so afraid to have what we believe to be true put to the test? Maybe it's because we have such a fear of uncertainty and doubt.

The classic reaction to uncertainty was perfectly illustrated one summer's day when a man in a rowboat fell into the water. Arms and legs flailing wildly, he screamed, "Help, Help, I can't swim!" Finally, a bystander shouted back, "Stand up, you fool!" The drowning man did so and found that the water came just up to his waste.

3. A third point about truth is this — how do we begin to reach the truth? By doing it. This is the answer of the Gospel according to John. This means more than just following the commandments and obeying the rules.

Doing the truth means living as Jesus Christ lived; and loving as Jesus Christ loved — to do the truth means to love one's enemies, for example. To do the truth means to be a giving, sharing human being. The Apostle Paul described doing the truth and being the truth in his first letter to the church in Corinth, especially in the passage on love — "If I speak in the tongues of human beings and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

To put it another way, distrust every claim for truth where you do not see truth united with love; and be certain that you are of the truth and that the truth has taken hold of you only when love has taken hold of you and has started to make you free from yourselves.

When you begin to do the truth, then on this road you will meet the liberating truth in many forms. You may encounter it in one sentence of a book, or of a conversation, or of a lecture, or even of a sermon. The one sentence is not the truth, but it may open you up for the truth and it may begin to liberate you from the bondage to opinions and prejudices and conventions.

What is truth? Jesus'answer to Pontius Pilate, is what he said earlier according to John's Gospel. "I am the way, the truth and the life." Jesus Christ wasn't much for persons just talking about the truth — he wanted to know if one was doing the truth, living the truth.

Jesus was not so much for theory as he was for practice. Truth is a stream of life, centered in Christ, actualized in everyone who is connected with Him. “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Christ calls us to be open, truth loving, and truth doing human beings.

The good news is that God understands our process of doing the truth and that it is often filled with trial and error. No one does the truth perfectly and completely. God knows that we can learn things today that shed a whole new light on yesterday’s conclusions, and this is what I hear Jesus calling us to do. Jesus tells us that God is more interested in our growth than in our mistakes, in how much we have learned from our mistakes rather than how many mistakes we have made. God wants us to be truth-seekers, and truth-testers, and above all, doers of the truth. Amen.