

The Whole Truth
Mark 14:53-72
First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
June 6, 2010
Pastor Dave Carver

Every now and then, I realize, you sit there and think, “You know, that Dave Carver seems like a nice enough fella, but he sure doesn’t think like the rest of us.” Yep. I know.

But because you think that from time to time, you’re not surprised when I say something like, “Do you know what word was recently named as both the American Dialect Society *and* Merriam Webster’s “word of the year”? I know, it’s pathetic, but I actually do know that. The “word of the year” – what is that, like the “US Open” for English Majors? Ahhh, it’s sad.

But anyway, both of those philological associations have an event wherein they release a report wherein they detail a word and its impact on our culture, and not long ago they agreed that “truthiness”, popularized by television host Steven Colbert, was the word of the year.

If you’ve seen his show, you know that term. If you haven’t, let me tell you what Colbert says about it: truthiness is a “truth” that a person claims to know intuitively “from the gut” without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts. In an interview, Colbert talked about the term, saying, “It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that’s not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything. It’s certainty...What is important? What you want to be true, or what is true?”¹

I thought about “truthiness” today because our reading brings us to two different “trials” – two different arenas in which the characters in the story claim to want to know the truth. In these two accounts, we see various examples of truth-telling and deception, and we see the power of words to shape reality for

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>

people in real and concrete ways. The first account gives us the arraignment of Jesus before the ruling council of the Jews – the Sanhedrin. It is, in one way or another, a formal trial. The second account is a series of informal conversations between Peter and various members of the staff outside the High Priest's home.

Let's talk about the hearing that Jesus had before the group of religious leaders. From start to finish, this was nothing more than a charade – an exercise in truthiness if ever there was one. Jewish law forbade conducting a hearing at night, but that didn't stop the chief priests and other authorities from moving ahead with it anyway. To make things worse, when the trial began, there were no charges against Jesus. Evidently, someone had paid a number of people to come forward and lay down some accusations, but none of these so-called witnesses could agree. In any other trial, Jesus would have been set free at that point – if you cannot charge a man, you cannot hold him for trial.

When the witnesses failed to provide charges that would “stick”, the high priest looked Jesus in the eye and tried to make him testify against himself, asking “Won't you answer? Why are these people talking about you like this?” But Jesus remained silent.

Finally, the high priest clutched at a straw and asked Jesus point-blank, “Are you the messiah?” Now **we** know the answer to that, because we read Mark 1:1, which tells us that the book is all about “Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. And whereas Jesus has been called the savior time and time again by people throughout the gospel, this is the time where he looks his questioner in the eye and says, “I am.”

“I am.” That's huge! Because Jesus is not just answering the question, he is answering the question by saying the Divine name. Do you remember when Moses asked God what God's name was? And God said, “I am”. In Hebrew, we see that as YHWH. In Greek, it's εγω αμ. “I am.” Jesus here explicitly states who he is, and he claims authority for himself that comes from God. In other words, he told the truth.

And that set off a firestorm of protests and shouting, which led to him being condemned to death. What is ironic is that as the guards taunt him and spit on him, they are saying, “Prophecy!” In their mocking, they are themselves fulfilling a prophecy that he made in Mark 10, where he said, “and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests...and they will condemn him to death...and they will mock him, and spit upon him...” Furthermore, while they are demanding that he make a prophecy, Simon Peter is out in the backyard fulfilling another one of Jesus’ predictions.

In sum, as we look at the first trial in our reading, that of Jesus, we see him to be a man of courage and honesty, one who is resolute in the face of injustice. Jesus is a man who, by telling the truth, apparently loses his life...only to wind up saving it in spectacular fashion at the end of the story.

When we look out the window and see Peter in the courtyard, we see a great contrast. Whereas Jesus’ trial was in a formal hall by men who had great offices, Peter is accused by regular folks on the street. As we look at these conversations, I want to put a word in for Peter. As we read last week, when Jesus was arrested, everyone fled. Everyone. Including Peter. But apparently Peter was the only one who was so desperate to do something – anything – to help Jesus, he shadows the group. It had to be dangerous for him.

When he is first questioned, he pretends to be confused, saying essentially, “What are you talking about? I don’t know anything about that...” When he is pressed a little further, he denies being a member of the Christian community, saying that he didn’t know any of the followers of Jesus. Finally, someone said that he was sure that Peter was with Jesus, and Peter denies any relationship with Jesus.

It’s interesting that Peter never says anything negative about the other believers or Jesus. In fact, in the oath he swears, he invoked a curse on himself – saying essentially, “Look, may God punish me if I am lying.” Peter knows he’s lying. You know he’s

lying. God knows he's lying.

Peter is weak in the face of this trial, and in his attempt to save himself, he winds up losing himself. One writer has said of these two trials, "If Jesus serves as an example for readers who faced the danger of death, the example of Peter is offered to the many who faced hostility, ostracism, and embarrassment...If in Jesus we see how God always is, in Peter we see how we always are."²

Last week, we talked about how Mark's original readers might have heard this passage, as they were surrounded by persecution. When they read that people are asking Peter, essentially, "Are you a Christian?" that is a situation in which they could picture themselves each and every day.

The readings for today present us with both the clarion call to be diligent in telling the truth as well as a reminder of how difficult and costly that act can be.

What does it mean to tell the truth?

"What is this, a trick question, Pastor Dave? Telling the truth means not lying."

Well, you're right. It is a trick question – because telling the truth means a lot more than simply avoiding the lie. In order to tell the truth, you've got to know the truth. And in order to tell the truth, you've got to have some context, some level of relationship with the person with whom you are sharing this truth. You've got to be able to express yourself in ways that make sense to the person with whom you are speaking.

Everybody knows it is often so much easier to simply lie. For instance, you walk into a room after a horrific day. The people with whom you have spent time and energy didn't get what you were saying or why you were saying it. The equipment you were supposed to use didn't work right. Your lunch order was all wrong, your cell phone died, and you had a flat tire on the way

² Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Interpretation Commentary on Mark* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1983) p. 267.

home. So when you finally make it home, and someone there says, “Hey, what’s going on? Something wrong?” it’s a LOT easier to shrug your shoulders and offer a baldfaced lie by saying, “Nah, I’m ok” and turn on the TV.

If you want to live in the truth, it’s a lot harder. You’ve got to investigate your feelings. You’ve got to decide why you feel that way. You’ve got to communicate that to the person who’s asked about your day, and you have to be open to a response. Pastor Walter Wangerin points out that it’s going through a difficult day three times – first, in the living of it, second in the thinking about it and reflecting on it, and third in the telling of it.³ That’s a lot of work!

However, if you are going to grow as a person and in relationship with those around you, you have to be willing to engage in that level of honesty.

Let me offer a word of caution here. Sometimes we use the truth as a weapon, or a battering ram or a tactic to get what we want. Someone says, “What did you think of my presentation?” and we say, “it was the sorriest twenty minutes I ever spent in my life...” And then, if challenged, we say, “Hey, I’m just telling the truth....” That’s not right. The truth is always a gift – always a benediction. When you are in conversation with someone, check your motive for saying what you are about to say...are you trying to put that person in his or her place? To make sure that you come out on top? Are you trying to get them to simply be quiet? Or are you trying to be honest and real with them in an attempt to be able to hear – really hear – what it is that they are saying?

One important thing that Wangerin points out about truthfulness (as opposed to truthiness) is that it leads to dependability. When we are true with what we say, we become people who live into our word. People can depend on our actions when our words give life.

I think about that as I picture the Apostle Peter sitting in his

³ *As for Me and My House* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1990), p. 122-123.

prison cell as Mark writes down his memories. Peter is telling the truth about both Jesus' sham of a trial and about his own denials of the Lord. Why, I wonder, did Peter speak so frankly and so openly about his own brokenness?

He told the truth. He told stories about himself that opened him up to the people who would read Mark's gospel – people who would know the terror of being confronted with questions about their faith and the One in whom they trusted. Peter told them the truth about his sinfulness so that they could embrace the truth about his forgiveness; he refused to let anyone think of him as a super-disciple; instead, as he told them of his failings he also invited them into his restoration.

Beloved, it is so easy to be less than truthful. We repeat stories or allegations we are not sure about. We dismiss honest questions with a shrug or a nod. We use the facts, as we understand them, as weapons to get what we want. Can we learn this morning from Jesus and from Peter to be women and men of integrity, honesty, and truthfulness? Can we aspire to be those upon whom our neighbors can rely to keep our word? Can we invite others to join us in the unfolding of this journey towards truth? Amen.