

Good news without simple truth

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The Gospel of John uses the word "truth" more than any other book in the Bible and way more than the other Gospels combined. Not only that, but many of the most-quoted verses in John, the ones that have shaped Christian discourse over the centuries, have been concerned with the question of truth.

Consider only a few examples: 1:14, describing how "the Word became flesh ... the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." In 4:23-24 Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that "the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." In 8:32 Jesus promises, "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free." In the discourse material of 14:6, Jesus describes himself as "the way, the truth, and the life." The Paraclete is described several times as "the Spirit of truth." In the "high priestly prayer" of John 17, Jesus prays that his followers "may be sanctified in the truth."

And, finally, in this week's passage, Jesus summarizes his identity and his mission with these words: "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." It is at that point that the exasperated Pontius Pilate asks, "What is truth?"

I suspect that John's Gospel focuses so much on truth and on what is true because of its polemical context and the way it privileges metaphors about trial: testimony, witnesses, and judgment are also common ideas in John's Gospel, which has been called "the martyr's gospel" for a reason. "Martyr" is the Greek word for "witness."

The witness in a trial in the United States commonly promises "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Martyrs tell the truth about Jesus with their lives--it has always been the most effective form of evangelism.

Early on, Tertullian noted that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." A bishop in South Sudan told me once, during the height of the civil war there, that every morning as he dressed himself in purple and put on his pectoral cross, he felt as if he was drawing a target on his chest. That kind of courage is inspiring to those of us who live in parts of the world where it is not dangerous to be a Christian.

Yet something about the way the word "truth" seems to function in the Gospel of John worries me: the evangelist John seems to have no difficulty discerning the answer to the question, "what is truth?" I, however, am sympathetic to Pilate's question, if not to his motives for asking it.

John seems to think that anyone who "belongs to the truth" can see the truth and that the truth itself is pure and simple. But as one of Oscar Wilde's characters commented, "the truth is rarely pure and never simple." I believe that we also witness to the good news about Jesus when we hesitate to locate truth on one side of an "either/or" dichotomy, and when we are cautious about claiming that we are telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Not one of us sees with the eyes of God. Our sightedness is always "partial," in both senses of the word: both incomplete and biased. Sometimes telling the truth about Jesus is best done by pointing to a truth that always eludes us, a truth that reminds us to "walk humbly" with God while we are daring to do justice and love mercy. Truth that is pure and simple is the luxury of the zealot.