

"Where is the Truth?"

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." The word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God!**

Every year at this time, I read Dr. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail. The letter penned to eight white southern pastors while he was locked up after being arrested during a peaceful protest. At the end of the letter, he speaks a prophetic word for us today.

"There was a time," he says, "when the church was very powerful. It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators"... Things are different now. The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's often vocal sanction of things as they are." Dr. King is asking "In a nation which claims itself to be Christian, Where is the church?"

So as a white southern pastor, I begin with a confession: Dr. King is right. Generally speaking, the church in America—primarily the white church—is not the church of Jesus Christ. A church using manifest destiny to justify the genocide of indigenous people. A church complicit in constructing an empire on the backs of kidnapped human beings, brought here in shackles, whose families were at once separated and dispersed to the highest bidder is not the church. It is a form of cruelty unlike any other form of slavery in human history. The slaves of Rome, Greece, and even the Israelites in Egypt were given the mercy of keeping their family structure. But not on our soil.

When visiting the Peace and Justice Museum in Birmingham, AL the first thing you see are the ship routes leaving the coast of West Africa. The second thing you experience are projectors displaying holographic 3D images of children moving around in their cages. Fear swimming in

their innocent eyes. Separated from their parents. Some five and six years old. And as my stomach quivers with rage and disgust, I wonder where was the church? Throughout our history in America the question rises again and again: Through Jim Crow: “Where is the church?” Through the incarceration of Black men for petty crimes, again separating families for profit: where is the church? Yes, today, our predominantly white ministers must start with a confession. Dr. King was right. In general, the church in America—especially what we see named as Christian Nationalism today, is not the church of Jesus Christ.

So what happened? Here’s my hunch: we stopped caring about the truth. Somewhere along the way the truth no longer mattered. Maybe it’s because the truth is not lucrative. Maybe it’s because the truth asks us to look at ourselves and the world in an honest light, and then admit we were wrong so then we can change our behaviors to make repairs.

But the Truth is central to our adaptation and transformation. Truth is the glue which holds our society together. It’s why in the court of law we have to put our right hand on the bible and solemnly swear to tell, “the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help us God.” But it only works if we have a conscience for the truth.

We currently live in a society where lawmakers are trying to erase African American history in order to control our horrific story. They are whitewashing the history and calling the kidnapping of West Africans “relocation.”

We live in a society where 70% of Republicans still believe the election was stolen. (Bless the 30% who do not!) And we have a presidential candidate who still claims the insurrection from three years ago was a peaceful protest—comparing it to a protest during the Civil Rights Movement.

Sidenote: Just imagine if the insurrection was full of black and brown people. Now be honest: What would’ve happened?

Without truth we can say anything we want and do anything we want without accountability. Is it really any wonder how we’ve gotten here? Because when we’ve stop caring about the truth there is no accountability, no compassion for the other, no remorse for wrongdoing, and we lose the glue which holds us together.

So now look at the gospel story. Jesus is fishing for disciples when he finds Philip. Philip goes and grabs his buddy Nathaniel who asks, “What good can come out of Nazareth?” and Philip says, “Come and see.” And what exactly is Nathaniel going to see which makes him understand what good can come out of Nazareth?

Well, if we go back a few verses in the gospel and listen to how Jesus is described we get a clue. It says, “he is the true light who is full of truth and grace.” What Nathaniel sees, what Philip sees, what John the Baptist sees, what the woman at the well sees, what the blind man sees, what every outcast not invested in the dominant system sees in Jesus is someone full of truth and grace.

In him they see the truth of our interdependence: “All people are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

They see the truth of our interconnectedness: “whatever effects one directly affects all indirectly. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

They see the truth that, “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.”

You see, Truth isn't an opinion or partisan loyalty, or even an altruistic ideology. Truth is not your perspective or mine. That's lower case “t” truth, which matters but is always too small. Capital “T” Truth is a way of being in the world that makes room for difference and diversity because it understands we are all connected to each other and to creation—which is the foundational Truth through which all things came into being since the beginning. And If we all came into being through the same womb, then we are all siblings, connected by the same source, right?

It is this Truth that dwells at the center of the gospel and of the Civil Rights movement. That justice is not for any individual group, it is for all of us.

According to the gospel, Jesus is the light of the world full of truth and grace. Notice: Truth and grace go hand in hand. Truth holds us open and accountable, and Grace allows us to see things as they are without being paralyzed by it so we can move forward together. Truth and grace is what Jesus came for and gave his life for. It is what Dr. King gave his life for. And it is what the true church is called to give its life for as well. And where then is the church?

So let's get practical: in a world of lies—which is what “darkness” means in John's gospel, what can we do? We keep speaking and using our voices. “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

So maybe we write a letter to an editor. Maybe we boycott the advertisers on Fox News or big money media. Or Maybe we show up like they did in Detroit.

A couple weeks ago, a story dropped about how in 2020, after the election ballots were counted, two voter officials and the secretary of state received a phone call from the president telling them not to sign the results. He told them he would hire them good attorneys and protect them. They didn't know what to do. At least not until hundreds—hundreds!—of voters showed up peacefully, outside the building, to remind them of their duty. To ensure that their votes mattered. Their voices mattered. The truth mattered. And after hearing the story I must admit I thought to myself, “Ah yes, there is the church!”

Friends, In 2024 there will be no shortage of opportunities to remind our society that the truth matters. So please know that when we stand side by side, offering ourselves for this great and simple cause, some may call us “disturbers of the peace” or “outside agitators.” But others will come and see, and maybe, just maybe, they too will think themselves, “Ah yes, there is the church!”