

Introduction

Preservation means keeping things alive and intact for future use—providing protection from spoilage or decay. When something is important to us, we want to preserve it. Take food for example. The first thing we humans learned to preserve was our food supply. Over the centuries, we have developed methods for preserving food by drying, smoking, salting, canning, freezing, and adding chemical preservatives. Then we turned our attention to books, art, manuscripts, monuments and historic buildings. Our libraries, museums, and historical preservation societies dedicate themselves, among other things, to preserving a record of our past. Only recently, have we started paying attention to preserving the future of our planet. In some cases our efforts at habitat and wildlife protection are already too little too late. Preservation is important. And nothing is more important than preserving that which is even more fragile than our food supply, more delicate than ancient manuscripts, more vulnerable than the environment—the preservation of the truth.

I

Well what is truth? In a recent survey, a stunning 72% of those 18 to 25 years old expressed the belief that “there is no such thing as absolute truth; different people can define truth in conflicting ways and still be correct.” Or as we said in the 60’s—different strokes for different folks. So, we politely respect the right of people to believe in everything from alien abductions to the healing power of the pyramids. We have our truth, others have their truths, and we are all suspicious of anyone who claims to have *the* truth. “*Now imagine a society in which we ignore the best, in which there is not longer a place for those spiritual absolute values,*” says one Dutch thinker. “*The very first characteristic is that, by definition, you get a total subjectivity because nothing is absolute. So everything is immediately reduced to my individual self or your individual self... It’s about how I feel, who I am, what my feelings are. It’s totally ego centered.*” (Rob Riemen) In other words, if there is no such thing as absolute truth, then why shouldn’t I lie? If there is no ultimate right or wrong, then why shouldn’t I cheat on my school work, why shouldn’t I cheat on my spouse, why shouldn’t I hate all my neighbors, why shouldn’t I blow up their house? If there is no absolute truth then my ultimate identity comes from the things I buy. I am what I own. So why should I care about the poor, oppressed and suffering people of the world? More and more Westerners seem to agree. Without absolute truth I am absolutely free. Your truth is for you, my truth is for me.

II

Of course it’s not just individuals who are intent on making up the truth as they go along. Governments and other institutions do the same thing. For instance, just inside the front door of the CIA, the world’s premier spy agency, you can see the agency motto inscribed in stone: “**And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.**” John 8:32. Apparently they interpret Jesus’ words to mean, “ye shall know the truth” by spying, lying, intimidation, impersonation, and assassination. Walk into a courtroom to testify at a trial and you will be asked, “*Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?*” However, it soon becomes clear that your honest testimony will be used by one side or the other not to illuminate the truth but rather to twist the facts. Truth is the first victim of war, said Rudyard Kipling, and it seems that his warning holds equally true for our so-called war on terror. So what are we to do?

III

Well, I for one don’t want to be a person of lies. And I don’t want my church, my government, my community leaders, my friends or my family to lie to me, and I suspect neither do you. Except in rare cases, of course. Like when my daughter was first learning to play the bassoon. If I had told her the truth about how I liked her playing then, she may never have become the accomplished musician she is today. Nevertheless, the danger is that it is so easy to lie, so effortless to embellish the truth. We are part of a culture that is preoccupied with protecting ego, power, and privilege. That’s why I think the first thing we need to do to preserve the truth is admit that we lie. Because “**if we claim that we are free of sin,**” the Bible warns us that “**A claim like that is**

errant nonsense.” **“We deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”** (I John 1:8) So the first step in preservation of the truth is to confess with St. Paul that **“I need something more. For I know the law but still can’t keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don’t have what it takes. I can will it, but I can’t do it. I decide to do good, but I don’t really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don’t result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. ... I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn’t that the real question?”** (Romans 7)

IV

“The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does.” ... Jesus does the truth in us when we embrace His way, His truth, His life, death and resurrection. **“Anyone, of course, who has not welcomed this invisible but clearly present God, the Spirit of Christ, won’t know what we’re talking about.”** acknowledges St. Paul. **But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells—even though you still experience all the limitations of sin—you yourself experience life on God’s terms. It stands to reason, doesn’t it, that if the alive-and-present God who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life, he’ll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus, bringing you alive to himself? When God lives and breathes in you (and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus), you are delivered from that dead life. With his Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ’s!”** (Romans 8) The preservation of the truth is nothing less than the preservation of God’s good news. The truth is that **“The word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”** (John 1:14-17) Here’s the point. Truth is not a proposition but a person. Even the Bible is not the truth with a capital T. Rather the scriptures are our compass in a world that has lost it’s bearings. And that compass unerringly points us in the direction of the One who alone is the way, the truth, and the life. Because truth is not about what has been laid down in a law book but about the One who laid down his life as our Savior. Truth is not found in a body of beliefs but in the body of Christ.

V

And guess what? For better or for worse, that means us. I sometimes wonder if God was having a senior moment when he established the church to be His truth-preserver I the world. But as St. Paul points out, **“We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That’s to prevent anyone from confusing God’s incomparable power with us. As it is, there’s not much chance of that.”** (II Corinthians 4:7) I cannot help but think of the the unadorned clay pots of the ordinary lives of the Amish community in Pennsylvania. When all those beautiful little girls were terrorized and murdered in cold blood, that community of faith showed the world what the preservation of the truth is all about.

Because of their profound trust in the truth of Christ, they preserved faith in the face of doubt, hope in the face of despair, forgiveness in the face of anger, and love in the face of fear. Flannery O’Connor said **“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.”** Maybe that’s the secret of the Amish, after all they are an odd bunch, aren’t they. The words of St. Paul could have come from the Amish themselves. **“We’ve been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we’re not demoralized; we’re not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we’ve been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn’t left our side; we’ve been knocked down, but we’re not knocked out.”**

VI

Of course becoming odd takes time. It’s not just a matter of wearing bonnets and straw hats. As one pastor puts it, becoming odd is painful, costly. It takes work, worship discipline, study, habits, attitudes, the gradual restructuring of our schedules. Preserving the truth is hard work. Like prophets in any age, we have to give up making excuses, being lazy, or going along just to get along. Discipleship means commitment to doing the truth. Loving one another as Christ has loved us. **“If you stick with this,”** says Jesus, **“living out what I tell**

you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you.” Free you from your damnable guilt, fear, selfishness, greed, and despair.

Conclusion

“I can’t tell you how happy I am to learn that many member of your congregation are diligent in living out the Truth, exactly as commanded by the Father.” (Writes John in his second pastoral letter.) **But permit me a reminder, friends, and this is not a new commandment but simply a repetition of our original and basic charter: that we love each other. Love means following his commandments, and his unifying commandment is that you conduct your lives in love. This is the first thing you heard, and nothing has changed.**” (II John 1:4-6) Trust me, if we conduct our lives according to Christ’s love, the Truth will be well preserved.
