
The gift of truth
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
March 12, 2023
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Exodus 17:8-13 and John 4:5-30

What do you think of the title of this reflection, “the gift of truth”. Is truth a gift? Is truth a gift that you wish you could return? Is truth a gift or an irritant? Or is it both?

So many questions. And in truth ... I do not really know where to start this reflection.

But there are at least two reasons I will argue that truth is a gift. One short answer and one long answer. Who knows, perhaps the long answer will take more than one sermon. In fact, I know it will. Because I’ve been speaking truth to you for some time now. And I’m not done yet.

So first - the short answer.

[image: lie detector]

What is this machine? It’s a polygraph machine. Better known as a “lie detector”. There are different types of lie detectors, but they all work by measuring a person’s physiological responses to statements that the person makes. The machines measure changes in a person’s heart rate, skin conductivity, and other indicators. And lie detectors work (when they do work) because of the simple fact that for normal people, lying causes us stress. And that stress leads to physiological changes that can be measured by a lie detector. Lie detectors do not measure lies. They actually measure stress.

Based purely on that one fact, truth is a gift. Think about it. If lying causes us stress, then we should want to tell the truth for our own personal health and well-being.

[image: if you tell the truth, it becomes part of your past. If you lie, it becomes a part of your future]

If we want to live peaceful lives, then we should tell the truth. And that’s not just about personal physiology. It’s common sense. When we lie, we are only inviting - creating actually - drama that we will have to deal with in our future. The only way to move on peacefully in life is to tell the truth. As someone one said, “If you tell the truth,

it becomes part of your past. If you lie, it becomes part of your future.”

[image: plato]

I know. Sometimes the truth hurts. But because truth is the path to progress, that hurt will not last forever. When we lie, we generate hurts that can last forever.

[image: the truth may hurt for a little while, but a lie hurts forever.]

Now - the much longer answer. But before we get there, we need to talk about what truth is anyway. Is truth a simple idea, or a complex one?

“In some philosophical traditions, truth is seen as an ultimate reality or absolute, while in other [traditions], it is viewed as a constantly evolving and subjective construct. Nonetheless, the pursuit of truth is a central goal of human inquiry and knowledge-seeking.”¹

[image: Churchill quote]

Many of us grew up thinking that truth was a simple thing. Our job was just to listen to the church, or other authorities, and then follow along. Winston Churchill famously said, “The truth is incontrovertible. Malice may attack it. Ignorance may deride it, but in the end, there is it”.

But I do not think that truth is that simple. Perhaps I’m a bit thick or I still have brain-fog from covid, but I really do not think that truth is that simple.

[Amy Poehler quote]

For one thing, what we consider to be true changes over time. People used to take as true - for example - that women were inferior to men. 100 years ago pretty much everyone thought that ... including most women. Today, we think differently. Today we believe that all people have equal value. Well, we don’t actually, but we are moving towards that position.

People used to take as true - for example - that white people were superior to everyone else. Charles Darwin who is credited for the theory of evolution, wrote in 1871, “At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage

¹ More wisdom from ChatGPT.

racess.”² Today we believe that all people have equal value. Well, we don’t actually, but we are moving towards that position.

[schopenhauer quote]

It used to be true that the earth is flat. It used to be true that demons cause mental illness. It used to be true that witches should be burned. It used to be true that the earth is the centre of the universe. None of those things are true anymore. Truth changes.

And that transition of truth is not always an easy process. Sometimes, if not always, it starts as a voice of a single person. A single person who is ahead of their time.

[ghandi quote]

They face ridicule, ghosting, gaslighting, and many other abuses and even death because most of the time, people do not like it when truth changes. Our continuing struggle with sexism and racism are because people still want to cling to a past that no longer exists. And it is unfortunate that Christians are often the ones leading the charge in reverse, supported by a particular way - I could say a peculiar way - of reading the Bible. There is lots of value in the Bible of course. But the people who wrote the Bible was sexist and racist - which is obvious if you read it closely. It is a struggle even in the church to move on from sexist and racist ideologies.

[image: reassuring lie]

But still - look out the window - and we know that collective truths about gender and race are changing. Truth changes over time.

I need to share a short video with you. I mean I have a medical need to share this video. Now you know that I love Brantford. But, when Marjorie and I moved to Brantford from Toronto, socially, it felt a bit like stepping back in time about 20 years. People who understand that have told me it is more like 40 years. Anyway, I get excited when I see signs that Brantford wants to live into today. Here is a short video that the City of Brantford made to honour International Women’s Day this past Wednesday.

[video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSPYS3T5JH4>]

I have to say that video made me feel more at home here.

[image: people who are mad at the truth]

² <https://evolutionnews.org/2022/02/the-racism-of-darwin-and-darwinism/>

Personally, I have no problem with the fact that truth changes over time. I am a scientist as well as a theologian and a minister. Because science has long held the view that of course our knowledge changes over time. And as our knowledge changes, truth naturally changes along with it. Science does not even attempt to find absolute truth. At all. The job of science is to see today's truth as our best guess at how reality works, and to continue to seek even better answers. Incidentally, when truth changes in science, actual scientists - who are human beings after all - react strongly against change too. I myself have witnessed a number of "religious wars" at scientific conferences. But that period of denial only lasts a short time. In religious circles, I have observed that the period of denial when truths change can last forever.

So one issue is that truth changes over time. But even at a particular point in time - say today - we do not all agree on what is true either.

Often, people disagree because they come with different assumptions and perspectives. Here is a classic example.

[image: 6 or 9]

Two people are looking at a figure on the floor. From one side, the figure looks like a 6. From the other side, the figure looks like a 9. Both people are completely convinced that they - and only they - are right. Of course, both people are looking from different perspectives. Now I realize that is just a silly cartoon. But I see this cartoon played out in our society, in our media, even at committee meetings in this church. We often have a very strong attachment to our perspective on truth. And we fail to realize there are other perspectives. Sometimes we mistake our perspective on truth with truth itself.

This cartoon is still being played out in our collective response to covid. The biggest factions in the argument are based on whether or not you trust the government. The way out of these impasses is NOT that we have to agree with the each other. But both sides have to start by simply recognizing that there ARE other perspectives, perhaps even valid perspectives. Then, the conversation can become more real. In the cartoon, both perspectives are equally true, and equally false.

Our perspectives impact us every day. And usually, we take our own perspective

as “normal” and fail to see alternatives. Here is a short story about a persons I will claim you do not know. I want to protect the guilty. And it’s not me. This person went to a car rental at an airport to pick up the car that they had booked weeks earlier. When they got to the counter, there was only 1 person in front of them. And our hero got to overhear the conversation between the customer and the agent. The person said to the agent, “I don’t have a reservation, but do you have any cars available?”. Our hero in this story immediately thought - that person is an idiot. They are a moron. They should know they need to book a rental car in advance. And I’m sure that many of you are thinking the same thing. The person then said, “I’m really sorry about this. But I did book a car with a different company and they just told me they have nothing in right now.” The person was not a moron. They were unlucky. And if any emotion should have been directed at them it should have been sympathy, not hostility. Our perspectives impact us every day.

I don’t want you to all fall asleep right now. But let’s all take a brief moment to consider this cartoon. And consider what conflicts you are having with other people in your life that are perhaps a matter of perspective. Imagine how you might open your mind to the possibility of other perspectives. Imagine how to move your conflict into more open, honest conversation. Imagine healing. And maybe, go do it. Take a moment now to reflect on that conflict in your life.

[image: forced perspective]

I like talking about perspectives, because they can be graphically illustrated. And it is fun to create silly images like this one. But often we disagree about truth not because of perspective, but because of underlying assumptions that are harder to show visually.

What do you think of these equations:

[image: with the equations below]

$$1 = 1$$

$$1 + 1 = 10$$

$$1 + 1 + 1 = 11$$

$$1 + 1 + 1 + 1 = 100$$

[go down and teach binary counting]

Those equations are all perfectly true. Now I know what you are thinking. You are thinking that when I got my clerical collar I threw away my calculator. You think my math is broken. You think those equations are wrong. But you only think that because you are making an assumption that I am not making. You are assuming I'm using a base-10 number system. But I'm actually using a base-2 number system. Also called "binary". And yes, those equations are all true.

I don't want you to all fall asleep right now. But let's all take a brief moment to consider those equations. And consider what conflicts you are having with other people in your life that are perhaps a matter of different assumptions. Imagine how you might open your mind to the possibility of other, valid assumptions. Imagine how to move your conflict into more open, honest conversation. Imagine healing. And maybe, go do it. Take a moment now to reflect on that conflict in your life.

[image: mark twain]

I want to close by digging into the biblical readings for today. How do they relate to truth? In the gospel of John, Jesus talks to a Samaritan woman. There are many things to lift up in that story, but today I just want to discuss the woman's response to Jesus. The woman ran into town and told everyone to come out and meet Jesus. And people responded and came out. But what "sales pitch" did the woman use to get other people excited? In verse 39 (which we did not read) it was the woman's testimony. And that testimony was, "[Jesus] told me everything I have ever done". The woman was not impressed by Jesus because of any particular words. It was simply the fact that Jesus spoke truth. Truth is that powerful. Speaking your own truth is that powerful.

[image: sadghuru]

Our reading from Exodus contains a deep truth. The story of the Hebrew exodus from Egypt is a myth that is not meant to be taken literally. But like any narrative, it includes elements of truth. In the portion we read today, people are killing each other of course. The point of the telling of that story was about how the Hebrews wanted to believe that God was on their side. And they expressed that in narrative form by saying that whenever Moses held up his hand, the Hebrews prevailed in battle, and whenever

Moses lowered his hand Amalek prevailed. So Moses had to keep his hand up during the entire battle. And he got tired. And when Moses got tired, Aaron and Hur sat with Moses and used their own strength to hold Moses's hands up.

The deep truth in this story is that we - in this community - need to hold each other up if we want to prevail. We need to support each other. We need to work together. We need to open ourselves to the needs of each of us in order for us to survive. If we do that, we will not just survive. We will thrive. The truth is simply this. We are all in this together.

And that simple truth is a gift.

Amen.