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The gift of truth  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
March 8, 2026  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 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.

So first - the short answer.

[image: polygraph machine]

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 stimuli. The machines measure changes in a person’s heart rate, skin conductivity, skin capacitance, and other parameters. And lie detectors work (when they do work) because of the simple fact that for most 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. Lie detectors measure stress.

Based purely on that one fact, truth is a gift. Think about it. If lying causes us stress, then why lie? We should want to tell the truth for our own personal health and well-being. So if we want to find peace in your life - as we discussed last week - if we actually want to live in peace, lying will only take us further away from that objective. That includes lying to ourselves.

[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 speak and live out our truth. And that’s not just about personal physiology. It’s common sense. When we lie, we are creating drama that we will have to deal with in our future. The way to move on

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peacefully in life is to tell the truth. As someone once said, “If you tell the truth, it becomes part of your past. If you lie, it becomes part of your future.”

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.

So that’s the short answer. Avoiding the truth leads to stress. Therefore, we should embrace truth. At least we should embrace truth if we actually want to live in peace.

Now - the longer answer. But before we get there, we need to talk about what truth is anyway. I would say that there are three essential questions about the idea of truth:

[image: list below]

- Would we expect truth to be simple, or complex?
- Is truth absolute, or relative? Or is even that a relative question?
- Does truth change - or at least, can truth change - or is truth constant?

Many of us grew up thinking that truth was a simple thing. Our job was just to listen to the church, or some other authority, and then follow along. But I do not think it is really that simple.

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. 120 years ago pretty much everyone thought that ... including most women.

[Amy Poehler quote]

Amy Poehler pointedly said, “It takes years as a woman to unlearn what you have been taught to be sorry for.”. Our society used to be very sexist. 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 ... actually, I’m not going to read the quote because it is too disgusting. Suffice it to say that Darwin’s original theory of evolution was racist. Today we believe that all people have equal value. Well, we don’t actually, but we are moving towards that position.

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[image: you are here]

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 Pluto was a planet. It used to be true that the sun revolved around the earth. None of those things are true anymore. Truth changes.

Or if you prefer - you could say truth never changes but our sense of what is true changes over time. But we usually believe that the truth we believe today is actually true. So for me that is not a meaningful distinction.

And there is no doubt that when truth changes, people often react negatively, and often with fear.

I love the story from 1829 about a group of very educated people - including medical doctors - who gathered to discuss a terrifying new invention - the steam locomotive. One “expert” declared “If a train exceeds twenty miles per hour, the human lungs will not function properly. Passengers will suffocate.” Another “expert” argued that the air would not be able to keep up with the train if the train moved too fast.

Fear is a common response to change. Today, people speak about how social media is destroying our ability to form meaningful relationships. The same fear was spoken years earlier .... about the telephone.

Fortunately, we usually move beyond our fears. According to one source, it took one generation to move from complaining that trains go too fast to complaining that trains go too slow.

[image: science vs religion quote]

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, our understanding of 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 keep working to find even better answers. And you have likely noticed that I take a similar approach to the Christian faith.

Incidentally, when truth changes in science, actual scientists - who are human beings after all - react strongly against change. I myself have witnessed a number of

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“religious wars” at scientific conferences. But that period of denial only lasts a short time. Because scientific assertions can usually be tested. And when new truths are proven, scientists accept those new truths.

In religious circles, I have observed that the period of denial when truths change can last a long time. Which I find odd. Because I believe that religious principles can also be tested. In very short summary - Jesus preached love. And we can just ask ourselves how well we are manifesting love in our own lives. And in our own faith. And it is ok if over time our sense of the truth changes as we strive to become more loving.

[image: “Don’t tell me what you believe. Show me how you treat other people and I’ll tell you what you believe” ... James Talarico]

US legislator and Christian Minister James Talarico has famously said of Christians, “Don’t tell me what you believe. Show me how you treat other people and I’ll tell you what you believe”. Talarico and I agree that Christian principles can be tested. Which means that Christianity can be made better. Truth changes. And when truth changes, we can fight to defend the past, or we can move into a better future.

So one issue is that truth changes over time. But even at a particular point in time - say today - we do not all necessarily 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 and our media all the time. We often have a very strong attachment to our perspective on truth. And we sometimes fail to realize there are other perspectives. Sometimes we mistake our perspective on truth with truth itself. Usually other perspectives exist. And we do best when we try to understand those different perspectives instead of just “doubling-down” on our own perceived truth.

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

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“normal” and fail to see alternative perspectives. Sometimes we fail to even admit that other perspectives exist at all.

Here is a true story. The hero of our story went to a car rental at an airport to pick up the car that they had booked months earlier. When they got to the counter, there was only 1 person in front of them. And so our hero got to overhear the conversation between that other customer and the agent. The customer 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 some of us are thinking the same thing. The customer then said, “I’m really sorry about this. I did book a car with a different company and they just told me they have nothing in right now.” So the person was not a moron. They were just unlucky. We could easily find ourselves in the same situation. And if we want to direct any emotional energy at that customer it should be sympathy, not hostility. Our perspectives impact us every day.

Let’s all take a brief moment to consider this cartoon. And consider what conflicts we are having with other people that are perhaps a matter of perspective. Imagine how we might open our minds to the possibility of other perspectives. Imagine how to move your conflict into more open, honest conversation. Imagine healing. And maybe, go do it this week. 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]

$$1 = 1$$

$$1 + 1 = 10$$

$$1 + 1 + 1 = 11$$

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

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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. Perhaps you are thinking that the real reason I left science was because my math skills are atrocious. You think those equations are wrong. But you only think that I am making an assumption that you don't know about. 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.

[teach counting in binary]

Our failure to understand other people's assumptions sometimes creates conflict in the church. Our failure to understand other people's assumptions is one driving force in our war against Iran. Western nations spew ridiculous assumptions about Muslims that are wildly inaccurate. Western nations have to realize that the path to peace will involve accepting that Islam is a legitimate religion. We have to find ways to partner with Muslims to work for peace. And not simply demonize Muslims to justify our own violations of International Law.

Let me share another true story. Two professors were at an evening meeting at the University of Saskatchewan. They were friends. They both usually took the bus to work, but always offered each other a ride if they drove to work that day. Because this meeting was during the evening, in the winter, it was reasonable to expect that at least one of them drove that day. At the end of the meeting, one professor asked the other "ride home?". The second professor answered, "sure". Both professors walked out to the parking lot. They found themselves standing in the middle of an empty parking lot. The second professor assumed they were being asked if they wanted a ride home. But in fact, the second professor was being asked if they would provide a ride home. They both laughed while they walked to the bus stop. Assumptions matter.

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 this week. Take a moment now to

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reflect on that conflict in your life.

[image: truth]

I want to close by digging into the biblical readings for today. 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? I 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 clever arguments. She was impressed because he told the truth. And strangely enough, she didn't run away from that truth. She ran toward it. She ran back into town and said, "Come and see." That is the strange gift of truth. Truth can sting. Truth can embarrass us. Truth can expose us. But truth can also set us free.

At the beginning of this reflection we looked at a lie detector. A machine that measures the stress our bodies feel when we lie. Apparently our bodies already know something our minds sometimes forget. Peace comes from truth. Lies create stress. Truth creates freedom.

So perhaps the real question today is very simple. Where in your life are you avoiding the truth? Where in your life might truth actually bring you peace? Because if Jesus teaches us anything in this story, it is this: Truth is not given to shame us. Truth is given to heal us.

And that is why truth - even uncomfortable truth - is one of God's greatest gifts. Embrace the gift of truth.

*Amen.*