

25 November 2018

Text: John 18:37 “. . . I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.

Peterson: “I was born and entered the world so that I could witness to the truth. Everyone who cares for truth, who has any feeling for the truth, recognizes my voice.”

THE SPIRITUAL SIDE OF TRUTH

AND ITS' COMPANION: LISTENING TO TRUTH

Introduction: Truth has been taking quite a public beating lately. It may be bloodied and bowed, but the attack on truth has at least raised its' discussion in the public arena. Our text for today reminds us that Jesus “came into the world to testify to the truth” Or, as Peterson translates, “I entered the world so that I could witness to the truth.” Let us spend some thought on the kinds of truth that we must deal with in our lives. There are four kinds of truth that need to be briefly noted, some, more briefly than others! Political, emotional, empirical and spiritual.

Political truth: Adolf Hitler's director of communications, Himmler, said that if a lie were big enough and repeated often enough it became the truth. As a political scientist I have often pondered political truths. Some I agreed with, as well as some that I didn't, all seem to be characterized by volume and frequency. That is, loud and often! How should one listen to political truths? Probably with ear muffs on. At least with ears of skepticism! Political truths have but one end; To effect the distribution of power in society. The question one must always ask on hearing political pronouncements is “whose ox is being gored?” Or, to phrase it more academically, who is getting more power and money and who is getting less?

Emotional truth: While the noise of political truth is generated externally, the next truth up for consideration is profoundly internal. It is emotional truth. This is the kind of truth that not only defines who you are, but how you approach the world. Are you a pessimistic soul? Perhaps seeing the world filled with threats and evil? If so, this is your truth. You are likely to react to this truth with caution and skepticism – seeing people as being basically selfish and self-centered. The world is out to get you – may be your basic orientation. Or, your emotional truth may reside on the other end of the continuum and you are optimistic seeing the world through rose colored glasses and accepting everyone as basically self-less, co-operative and motivated by the desire to do good. Of course, the reality of living is more complex than living on one end of the continuum or the other. We tend to jump about, selecting our emotional truths by topic. So, we are optimistic and pessimistic by turns, depending on what and who we are dealing with.

How do we listen to emotional truths? Not with a skeptical ear, but with our inner ear. We listen to our inner debates and the conclusions we reach, the consequent behaviors we engage in, are always self-confirming. That is, whatever we do proves the accuracy of our emotional truth. The sum total of all of the emotional truths you build for yourself is You! The good, the bad, the indifferent, the hero and the coward – all of these co-existing beings are created by your emotional truths. Fortunately, they are not fixed. Human beings are more plastic than they are concrete. Over time and experience, our emotional truths may well change. In any case, we should pay attention and listen carefully to our inner-ear, for that is who we are at that moment.

Empirical truth: If we all fight one another for the exclusive possession of this room, we are engaging political truth; if we are all claiming our own, separate favorite pew in church, that pew where we really feel most at home, we are engaging in emotional truth, but if we take out a tape measure and describe the room in terms of inches and feet and cubic feet, we are engaging empirical truth. And, at a very simple level, we are establishing an empirical truth through the scientific method. The scientific method gives us space travel and better farming, it creates medicines for our ills and GPS so we know where we are. The scientific method lets us trace the evolution of humankind and the development of the universe. It is what has given us the modern world as we know it and as it will become. It creates temporary truths – it is not a self-confirming measure, rather it is a self-correcting system of thought. For those of us who diet, who has not said “I wish medicine would make up its mind. First they tell me that coffee is bad for me and then a few years later, they tell me that I should drink it because it is good for me.” That is because the truths are temporary and later research may contradict earlier findings. That is good – that is the way science works. Some truths are more temporary than are others. I may wait for the health benefits of ice cream to be scientifically demonstrated – but I don’t think that I will jump off a building hoping that the force of gravity has just been over-turned.

How do we listen to science? With our intellectual ear. We look for the source of the data, how those data were processed and what the probability of the outcome is. If we are dealing with the social sciences, and in many cases with the physical science, we may look at the various public policy alternatives generated by the scientific knowledge. Those policies may be debated, even if the data are agreed on. Such is the function of our intellectual ear. This is the critical approach to life that always asks the question: What are the data and what do the data say?

Spiritual truth: While a spiritual truth is eternal, it is not loud. While it is deeply personal, it is not plastic, changing with our mood. Although spiritual truths are knowable, they are not self-correcting, but rather are self-confirming. When Jesus said that he came into the “world, to testify to the truth”, he had a very specific truth in mind that he made abundantly clear: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:34-39) The wonder of this truth is that it integrates all parts of our being. We are truly one in Truth.

Conclusion: We are surrounded by claims to be the holders of truth. While all truths may have legitimacy, only spiritual truth is fully integrative and allows us to know the physical world in its’ fullest context. Political, emotional, empirical and spiritual – all truths with which we must wrestle. But it is God’s truth, heard with the ear of faith, that makes us whole. Amen