

“Rooted in THE Truth”

NT: John 15:1-15  
John 14:1-6, 25-27

## **Read John 14:1-6, 25-27**

In thinking about wrapping up this Summer Sermon Series “Rooted”, I first thought about revisiting each of the previous 16 weeks. Kind of like Kathleen did as she inspired us about service a few ago. Then, a series of things happened. A couple weeks ago, Erik asked me about what all this meant in relation to truth. Then, Barrett and I were listening to some new songs and she played “Truth be Told” by Matthew West. Then, a journal, *Theology Matters*, came out entitled “Confessing Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life in a Pluralistic Culture.” Intriguing right? Not coincidental! Our last focus on being rooted could have easily been the first, “THE truth”.

To begin today I want to look closer at the text from John 14 we just read.

How many of us would have answered Jesus the way Thomas did?

We do not know the way! How are we to know the way?

The disciples were frightened because they were about to be left to do something Jesus had been doing for them. Up to this point in their journey with Jesus they were enjoying learning from Jesus through both his actions and his words. Jesus was the ultimate example for how to live and they had front row seats to the action. It was Jesus who displayed a faithful covenantal relationship with God. It was Jesus who made the decisions of who to talk to; Jesus who took the risks; Jesus who performed and served and taught. It was Jesus who knew all the when’s, where’s, why’s, what’s, and to what extent’s. The disciples did not quite understand why Jesus had to go away so soon and they certainly did not understand the way he had told them he had to go. Here is the thing. Jesus knew the disciples were afraid and doubtful and unsure, so his words in John 14, and I think 15 as well, are words of assurance, comfort, guidance, instruction, and encouragement. Jesus was not be with them any longer physically, but he was not leaving them empty handed. The advocate, the Holy Spirit, would be there to help them and guide them just as Jesus did. Jesus lived in peace because he lived as one with God and it was the same peace he lived with that he offered to the disciples. “My peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

How were the disciples going to know what to do and when and where and who to talk to and to what extent? What was that going to look like? On what basis, and by what right, and on what grounds were they going to say and do what they were going to say and do?

In John 15, Jesus makes another declaration, one the disciples would clearly understand and be able to rely on. Jesus said, "I am the vine and you are the branches." "Abide in me." "If you abide in me and I in you, your life will be complete with joy and you will bear the fruit I intend." What the disciples had to do now was stay connected; to abide in Christ; to be rooted. As the days, and weeks, and months, and years would come, the disciples had to remember their relationship with Jesus, recall his teachings and lessons and examples, and remain rooted in THE true source of life. If they abide in Christ, the Holy Spirit that dwells inside them, would work in and through them to do remarkable things to bring God's kingdom to earth as it is in heaven. If they would abide in Christ, they would grow from their roots and begin reaching; blossoming; bearing fruit- fruits of the Spirit like love, joy, peace, goodness, faithfulness, generosity, and hospitality. However, if removed from THE true source of life, there is a good chance of wilting and drying up, like a flower cut off from its root system. And as we all know with a bouquet of flowers we receive; it does not take long for flowers to wilt and die once they are cut off from their source. But flowers that remain rooted and connected to THE true source of life can blossom repeatedly and bear beautiful fruit.

What do we think then when THE true source of life declares, "I am THE truth!"? The ultimate question, I think, for us to consider today is: What is THE truth you are rooted in? On what basis, by what right, on what grounds do you say what you say or do what you do? Where, finally and definitively, do you get your understanding of THE truth?

Jesus declares, "I am THE truth." How do we know? First, there is only one Jesus, the one revealed in the Bible, who is the very Word of God, and second, THE truth must be divine.

One of the confessions included in the Presbyterian Church *Book of Confessions* is *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*. The *Barmen Declaration* was written and adopted by the church in response to the rise of Nazism in Germany, and it begins by declaring, "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." What the declaration stands for is Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone is the standard or rule by which church's preaching is to be measured! Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone is the yardstick, norm, or criterion by which the church's speech is to be assessed! Jesus Christ, not just any version of Jesus we can make up, but Jesus Christ as attested for us in Holy Scripture, is what counts, first and last, as God's true revelation. Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone is "THE truth."

One of the first things the *Barmen Declaration* seeks to defend and declare is that not just any Jesus, as can be made up in our own image, suffices as “THE truth.” All throughout history, people have created their own versions: the Germans believed in an Aryan Jesus in the 1930s there are also white Jesus’, Americanized Jesus’, African Jesus’, and Latino Jesus’. I have even witnessed a feminist painting rendering a female Jesus. John Calvin declared that the “human heart is a perpetual idol factory (Institutes, 1.11.8).” What he means is that we are all guilty of creating our own version of Jesus to suit what we need or want. But the Jesus who is “THE truth” is the Jesus attested for us in Holy Scripture who is THE Word of God. We do not know Jesus as “THE truth” apart from the Word and we do not know the Word apart from Jesus.

How do we know anymore what truth is?

In our pluralistic culture today, it can be a challenge to decipher what is true. I do not know about you, but I feel like there are so many other events and powers and figures and truths in this world vying for recognition and acknowledgement that claim powerful authority in defining my being. It is so noisy that it can be hard to decipher.

I would like to share an example in connection with the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*. It is recorded that Hitler publicly said and did many things to demonstrate his loyalty to the church. After being sworn in as Chancellor in 1933 he said: “Today, Christians and no international atheists, stand at the head of Germany.” Hitler was known to invoke the name of “God Almighty.” What do you think was going on in the minds of German citizens at the time? Given the events that would unfold, does that mean Hitler privately loathed the church and the God revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures? How do we make sense of this?

If you want facts, where do you turn? It seems anymore that you can get facts to support anything you need, so then what or who is the basis or the grounds for which everything said and done is measured?

In our pluralistic culture, it is not only a challenge to decipher, it is a challenge to know how to declare THE truth. Consider this for a moment: Is it not true that for something to be true, something else must be false? We might naturally think the opposite of telling the truth is telling a lie. Does this translate then to say because Jesus is “THE truth” then anything in opposition to Jesus is false or a lie?

I think this can present one of the greatest challenges within the conversation of truth. To declare that Jesus is THE truth, is to declare someone or anyone else not. Isn’t this the rub for most? I am not sure it is the declaration of Jesus as “THE truth” that is the

problem. The rub comes when accompanying “Jesus is THE truth” with another declaration that someone or anyone else is *not* the truth. Humans, particularly those in power, do not take kindly to this. I have found in some cases that what is heard most and what people cling to most is not so much what you openly affirm as what you openly reject.

“In first century Rome, for example, not many cared if you affirmed ‘Jesus is Lord.’ You could yell it to the top of your lungs. Not many cared. But if you said, ‘Jesus is Lord, and Caesar isn’t,’ that could get you in real trouble.”

I feel like if we cannot define what “THE truth” is for our life, we will be unsettled and confused- like chaff able to be blown about by the wind. I mean, if something is good- that is it looks good, feels good, sounds good, and seems good- then does that make it good? How about true? Masks, face coverings, alternate personalities, speeches, etc., may make things appear fine and good, but does that mean they are?

I mentioned earlier Matthew West’s new song “Truth be Told”. It addresses this.

*Lie number one- you're supposed to have it all together and when they ask how you're doing, just smile and tell them, "Never better."*

*Lie number 2- everybody's life is perfect except yours so keep your messes and your wounds and your secrets safe with you behind closed doors.*

*Truth be told, the truth is rarely told...*

*I say I'm fine, yeah I'm fine oh I'm fine, hey I'm fine but I'm not... I'm broken.  
And when it's out of control I say it's under control but it's not... and you know it  
I don't know why it's so hard to admit it when being honest is the only way to fix  
it... There's no failure, no fall... There's no sin you don't already know...  
So let the truth be told*

*There's a sign on the door, says, "Come as you are" but I doubt it  
'Cause if we lived like it was true, every Sunday morning pew would be crowded  
But didn't you say the church should look more like a hospital, a safe place for the  
sick, the sinner and the scarred and the prodigals... Like me.*

*Can I really stand here unashamed... Knowin' that your love for me won't change?  
Oh God if that's really true, then let the truth be told.*

What is THE truth you are rooted in? Jesus, as attested for us in Holy Scripture; some other version of Jesus, or someone- something else?

To dig even deeper, I wanted to spend a moment considering whether other events and powers and figures and truths can serve as God's revelation outside Jesus? How about nature, history, and experience? Can they be tentacles of THE truth?

The Rev. Dr. Richard Burnett shares, "There was once a professor in a seminary who said he had learned as much about God listening to Bruce Springsteen than from reading the Bible or from anything he had heard in church. Maybe you are very fond of Springsteen and really, really like his music, but does that hold up as THE truth? Some people like to suggest they can worship God as well standing on a seashore or watching a sunset or sitting in a deer stand as they can in any church, or they have learned more about God from their mother or grandmother, than anything they have read in the Bible or heard in church. Maybe so. Maybe we do learn more about God from nature, our mothers, or Springsteen- depends maybe on what we were doing when we were reading the Bible or in church. The issue is not where we learn about God, but about where we learn THE truth. We can learn all sorts of things about God by many different means- I would insert here that I could even argue that we can learn a lot about God and even worship God through sports and play- but the real question is how we know what we are learning is true, and what difference it would make, unless we know THE truth about God; THE truth that God loves us and sent Jesus to die for us in order that we might live with God forever? We did not learn this on a deer stand, standing on a seashore, or watching a sunset, as inspiring as these settings are. We learned about Jesus as THE truth as attested for us in the Holy Scriptures."

To suggest other events and powers and figures and truths can reveal THE truth suggests more than one single standard, one rule, one yardstick, one norm by which we determine truth. And these other things are not divine. To be clear, I am not denying that nature, history, and experience can teach us a lot. I am not denying or wishing to underestimate the power of nature or nurture. I am not disputing or wishing to minimize the influence of our genes or experiences. I am also not denying there are certain immutable aspects of our being that we may refer to as truths of our being. But we are broken and as broken people, our own truths are hard to reconcile with others. With all this in consideration, I believe THE truth must then be something bigger than us, bigger than any sum of us as humans, bigger than nature, nurture, history, or experience even. These may very well be tentacles containing elements of THE truth, but THE truth is something, better yet someone, that can transcend culture and event and time and space and power and opinion and emotion. THE truth is divine.

Jesus Christ is not just one truth among others. He is THE truth, the basis, and right, and ground, and standard by which all others are measured. "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us

in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.” (Barmen Declaration)

Ultimately, one cannot live from many truths. One can live truly from only one truth. So, what is THE truth you are rooted in?

John Calvin teaches we will never know THE truth about ourselves until we know THE truth about God. THE truth about God is that God is our redeemer, that Jesus Christ is our Savior.

The Heidelberg Catechism, Q.1.A.1. speaks of our truth this way (repeat after me):

I belong...

I belong- body and soul, in life and in death...

not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ...

who at the cost of his own blood...

has fully paid for all my sins...

and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil...

that Jesus protects me so well...

that without the will of my Father in heaven...

not a hair can fall from my head...

that everything must fit God’s purpose for my salvation...

By God’s Holy Spirit...

God also assures me of eternal life...

and makes me wholeheartedly willing...

and ready from now on to live for God.”

To be rooted in Jesus Christ is to be rooted in THE truth. How are we to know the way? God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit is “the way, THE truth, and the life”! Everything else is... well... everything else.

Let all God’s people say... Amen.

*\*Inspired by The Rev. Dr. Richard E. Burnett, Executive Director and Managing Editor of Theology Matters, “Jesus Christ is the Truth”\**