

Sermon: What is Truth?

Delivered: June 14, 2020 First UM Church Erie 9:00 Service Only

I. Deceit & Mistrust

Let's all pray before we reflect upon God's Holy Word. Have you ever had someone play a trick on you? A real good practical joke? Or just one of those good jokes that springs on you at the end, you don't see it coming, until it's too late? It's funny sometimes to get fooled, other times not so much, right? It's okay when we all laugh, but it isn't funny when it costs you something.

Then there are outright deceptions. How about when you buy something because you are told its quality, and then it's not, it's cheap, made in china, it's just something destined for the landfill, that's not a good way to be fooled. Or when you are sold on a great job opportunity, something you can do, make a real difference, help change things for the better, but in the end, it turns out, you were just another number. Or worse still, you asked someone for help, or relied upon someone close to you, and they betrayed your trust. That's no good either!

What if you trusted someone to tell the truth, and then learned, that it just wasn't so? What if that falsehood they told, what if it cost you your job, what if it ruined your family, or you lost your home?

We live in a world where truth seems to be becoming more and more elusive.

It's hard to find truth, isn't it? Take for instance this coronavirus. At first it seemed we overreacted, then there was finger pointing on being unprepared. And the guidance we get, it often doesn't add up. Stay home, but you can leave home get essential things. You're non-essential. No wait, you are essential.

Remember reading we shouldn't buy masks; they won't help. Then suddenly we had to buy masks, because they're mandatory, but actually not really, but encouraged. Then we read, we'll only be safe when there's a vaccine; and you can find as many articles about how there won't be a vaccine.

It's getting worse. It's almost over. It lives on surfaces. It's in the air. It's not on surfaces. It's heavier than air and thus hard to catch. Don't see people. Well, you can see people, but only if you are 10 feet away. No, 6 feet away. But only if you wear a mask. Pastor Jim has done a wonderful job trying to keep up with all of this for the sake of our church. We all should be thankful to him, and it's a wonder he hasn't gone insane with all of this!

More recently, the news turned to: these are peaceful protests. These buildings burning behind us are evidence of the peaceful protests. In early May, the television talking heads said protestors were villains, risking a 2nd wave of coronavirus. In

early June, those same people now explain how protestors are heroes. Then we hear that some violence is ok, it is justified because of other violence in the past. A prominent leader within our own UM denomination stated that violence is acceptable, because it is concomitant with the 400 years of systematic violence. When did one wrong start correcting another wrong?

Unfortunately, we are confronted with a lot of conflicting information. Conflicting perspectives. Unresolved logic. Confusion is understandable; it is part of life. Disagreement is to be expected. Much of this confusion may not have had malicious intent, perhaps even most of it is innocent. But the Christian must be aware that deceit is one of the primary tools of a character in the bible we too often forget.

II. The Father of Lies

It can be difficult to remember that Christians are called to not be OF the world, but only to pass through it. We need to remember there is a cosmic battle raging, a battle of souls being saved, souls being lost, a battle of angels and demons.

There are hints of this in scripture. Think of Daniel Chapter 10, where the Angel Michael fights for 21 days so that Daniel can receive a message from another angel. We know from Ephesians 6:12 that

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

“The greatest trick of the devil is convincing people he doesn’t exist.” This is a modern quip based on writing from 19th century’s Frenchman Charles Baudelaire. There may be some schools of thought within Christianity that actually believe Lucifer isn’t a person or angel, but some symbolic force. We fall victim to our 5 senses and particularly to the letting our attention be upon the world we see.

Charles Baudelaire’s full quote was:

One of the artifices of Satan is, to induce men to believe that he does not exist: another, perhaps equally fatal, is to make them fancy that he is obliged to stand quietly by, and not to meddle with them, if they get into true silence.

Pastor William Ramsey a few years later echoed that sentiment in 1856
“Spiritualism, a Satanic Delusion, and a Sign of the Times”

One of the most striking proofs of the personal existence of Satan, which our times afford us, is found in the fact, that he has so influenced the minds of multitudes in reference to his existence and doings, as to make them believe that he does not exist; and that the hosts of Demons or Evil Spirits, over whom Satan

presides as Prince, are only the fantasies of the brain, some hallucination of mind. Could we have a stronger proof of the existence of a mind so mighty as to produce such results?

But is the church aware that we, too, can be deceived? Can a congregation, a denomination, or perhaps even all of Christianity be deceived?

Unfortunately, the answer is yes. See 2 Thessalonians Chapter 2:

Verse 8: And then shall that lawless one be revealed, whom the Lord shall slay with the breath of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming:

9 The coming of the lawless one is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders,

10 And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they refused to love the truth, and so they might be saved.

11 And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie:

You may be thinking, “hold on there, that’s about the end times, that’s a special case” But perhaps not! Maybe some of you listening are feeling as if 2020 has done a decent job so far of qualifying as the end times documented in the Bible.

We’ve got to remember that God operates outside time. He’s not like us, seeing only the moment for what it is. His perspective would be something more like you’d see of a parade, if you were standing on the tallest building. He can see the beginning and the end, simultaneously.

But we’re caught up in the thick of this parade, only able to see what’s right before us.

Wouldn’t it be pretty handy to be able to rely on that vantage point of God?

You bet it would. God is that for us, his Truth is like a lighthouse, high upon a rock. Unwavering, solid, a beacon, and true. In the last few months, there has been a lot of bad news, and some wrong news, even some fake news. You’ve probably heard before, A lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on. Much of the misinformation may be unintentional, but Christians would be wise to remember that the father of lies is still at work. It seems he is able to take even an innocent mistake and craft it into a magnificent deception.

III. What is Truth?

A verse than echoes in my mind, a haunting question, is surprisingly not one asked by Jesus, written by Paul or uttered by a prophet. Rather, it came from a pagan Roman, likely a ruthless tyrant. In John 18:38, Pontius Pilate asked Christ, such a short question, but perhaps one of the most potent philosophical inquiries ever made! “What is truth?”

Christ did not respond, because He didn’t have to!

John 14: 6 holds the answer.

I am the way, THE TRUTH, and the life. No one comes to the father except by me.

GOD IS TRUTH. Christ, and Christ alone.

We must anchor ourselves in God's truth, especially when the storm rages. In a time such as this, when everything seems upside down, when so little seems good and trustworthy, we must embrace God's Holy Spirit, dwell in his truth, step out of the division, the confusion, the deceit, the doubt.

What a diversion, what a distraction from the truth! Peter saw the truth.

The Gospel scripture for today: Matthew 16:13-20

When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I, the Son of man, am?

14 And they said, some say that you are John the Baptist: some, Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.

15 Jesus said to them, but whom say ye that I am?

16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed are you, Simon: for flesh and blood has not revealed it to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

18 And I say also to you, That you are Peter, and upon this ROCK I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

19 And I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever you shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

20 Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.

What is the rock that Jesus said he would build his church upon? It is the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

IV. Put on Your Belt

Christianity has been consistently persecuted throughout history. It still is in many other countries. And sadly, the era of Christianity being an accepted and approved part of western culture, or even a majority of the people, appears to be drawing to a close.

Pastor Jerry Waldrop, of Mississippi, said: "I never thought that in America I'd experience what it was like for ... armed policemen to hand me an official government document, ordering our community of faithful to cease and desist worshiping on Easter Sunday and to depart the House of God."

Then, on May 21st: his church in Mississippi was destroyed by a suspected arson fire about a month after he filed a lawsuit challenging the city of Holly Springs on coronavirus restrictions. This church proceeded to challenge that closure, and ultimately the church was burned down, with graffiti found at the scene reading: "Bet you stay home now you hypokrits [sic]."

News like this can be discouraging. Not being able to worship together is tough on the church. Its fundamental to being Christian. And now seeing society crumble around us, good people being attacked, it is heartbreaking.

It has been said that persecution has caused the church to thrive throughout history. This was true during the reformation, the purges and inquisitions of the dark ages, even during the Roman martyrdom of thousands of early Christians. However, it does look bleak. Which is why we need, as individual Christians, and as a congregation, to not participate in the fighting or the despair. We need to focus our fight on the real enemy of God's plan. Our only real enemy is the father of lies (John 8:44).

We don't often acknowledge that the Angel Lucifer is a real character, not only in scripture, but still at work. He is the accuser; he is the prince of this world. Those are but a few of the dozens of titles in the bible, 37 seems to be the count most commonly agreed upon. At any rate, he is real, and he is busy. Is he going to defeat God or foil God's plan? Certainly not. Is he God's equal? Absolutely, not! But is he stirring up a whole lot of trouble? You betcha!

Recall Jesus said to the Pharisees: You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

His plan has ever been to foil God's plan. It could be said the bible is the story of Lucifer thwarting God's intentions, from the apple in the garden, the tower of Babel, Joseph's brothers selling him to slavery, the temptation of David through Bathsheba, the killing of the prophets, the (nearly successful) attempts to end of the royal line of David, the slaughter of the babes of Bethlehem, the crucifixion of Christ, the slaughter of the early Christians, and in the yet future, the time of Jacob's trouble, the final chapter of Israel's persecution.

This character is real. He has never been idle, and he is not idle now. Yet thankfully, we do have this amazing shield, in the form of the Holy Spirit.

I know many Christians who's favorite chapter in the bible is Ephesians 6:

10Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. 11Put on the full armor of God, so that you can make your stand against the devil's schemes. 12For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this world's darkness, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

13Therefore take up the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you will be able to stand your ground, and having done everything, to stand. 14Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness arrayed, 15and with your feet fitted with the readiness of the gospel of peace. 16In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

18Pray in the Spirit at all times, with every kind of prayer and petition. To this end, stay alert with all perseverance in your prayers for all the saints. 19Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will boldly make known the mystery of the gospel, 20for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it fearlessly, as I should.

It's important to include the last bit about prayer. It rounds things out to 7, which is one of God's favorite numbers, to show something is intentional and complete. It also is much like the heavy artillery. When you can't duke it out on your own, you call in for the heavy firepower, the backup.

Imagine the next time you are praying for someone, that an angel could be standing against evil, or you could be helping God's Holy Spirit to protect someone from temptation or helping to heal someone. Prayer and the action of the Holy Spirit seem to be intertwined.

But let's focus in Verse 14: The Belt of Truth is buckled around your waist. Just as you dress yourself each morning, you must put on this belt, spiritual armor and ensure truth holds you together so you are prepared to carry the Gospel, to carry Joy and decency, and not be slammed by the wickedness around us.

V. Conclusion

Remember that lighthouse? In Matthew Chapter 5, Jesus told us that we are the light, and we are to shine upon the world. God is the ROCK. He is the foundation, beneath that lighthouse.

The waves crash upon that ROCK, but that ROCK does not move. And if the lighthouse is securely rooted upon the rock, it too will stand firm.

In Matthew Chapter 16, our Gospel Lesson, Christ stated: Upon This Rock, will I build my Church. The Rock is the truth that Christ is Lord. There's been some that claim Christ meant Peter would be the Rock upon which the church was built, but Peter was no rock. He wavered as we all do. Christ said "you are Peter (πέτρος, petros) and upon this rock (πέτρα, petra) I will build My church". It was a play on words, but also distinct. Christ is Lord! That is the foundational truth of our faith. This Rock does not waver. God as the rock is an amazing study throughout the bible; it is amazing how consistent that theme pops up, in both the New and Old Testaments.

Christ is your truth; in Him you can set your anchor. In Christ alone, can we stand against the wiles of the devil. Nothing else in this world, sadly, not even our church or our country, can live up to its mission and target ideals.

We can rely on nothing else besides Christ. Put on that Armor of God, ensure that you are rooted in Christ's truth, and don't worry about the fake news that surrounds current events.

Perhaps if we can do that, we can spread that Joy that abounds in knowing Christ. The world certainly needs that Joy, and whether it receives it or not, we can make Christ known, spreading love, peace, and truth.

Imagine what God could do through you, and me, if we together put on the Armor of God. How would our attitudes change if every day we adorned breastplates of righteousness and belts of truth?

Argument, protest, defiance, and being generally miserable won't show our unbelieving neighbors how Christ has extracted us from this chaos.

We have an unchanging God. His news is reliable, and His identity is the essence of truth. Take comfort, take Joy! In His Word, His Promise, and His Peace. And may God's Holy Spirit spread that, far beyond any fear, any anger or any trouble, and may it last longer than any virus.

We will know only peace when we fight for Christ. These other distractions only draw our focus away from the ROCK of Christ. Focus on him, fight only for him, and find peace therein!

May God bless us all and give us PEACE as we embrace his Truth!