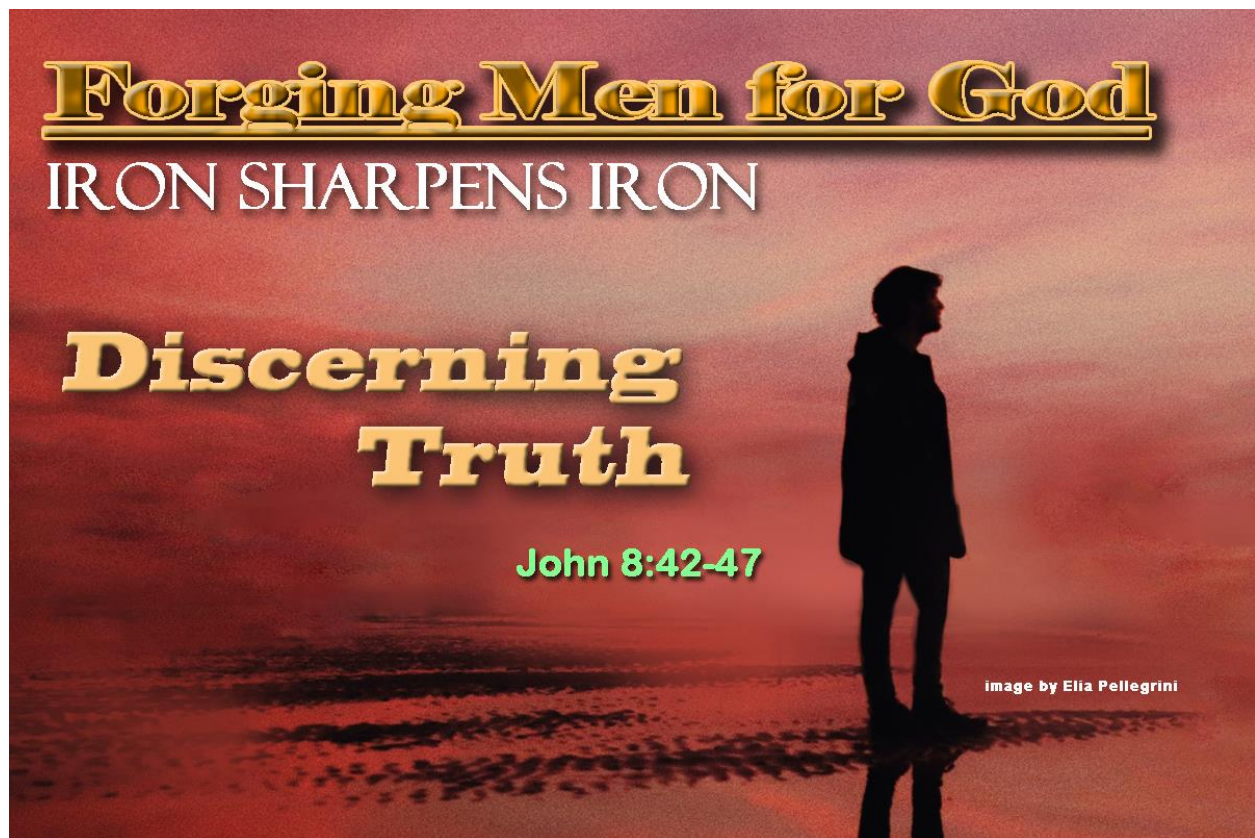


June 14

Discerning Truth



John 8:42-47

42 Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me.

43 Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say.

44 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.

45 Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me!

46 Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me?

47 Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.”

Special Music:

Voice of Truth - Casting Crowns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcuiulwtpa4>

I want to begin today with a quote from a recent Facebook post by our regional minister, Andy Mangum, a man I deeply respect and am pleased to call “friend.”

His words:

Before I preach I usually pray, "And now among the words that are spoken may the Word that is spoken, be Yours." That's a short hand way for me to say, "God, I know that everything I'm about to say is affected by my own limitations and my sinfulness. Maybe I've done the best I can to discern Your word this week and maybe I neglected my responsibility to faithfully prepare, but either way here we are before this congregation and they deserve so much more than I can give them in my strength alone. So, in the space between the words, speak. Holy Spirit, speak to us all. Reassemble the jumble of fragments that are about to come out of my mouth into a mosaic of Your own design. And if nothing I say is salvageable, cast the pot away and begin with new clay."

Preaching is always a terrifying act. If you do not preach, you may not know just how scared your pastor is when she or he preaches. It's not the anxiety of public speaking. Public speech anxiety can be managed. It's the weight of the moment. Disciples speak of representative ministry--ministers re-present (present again) Christ to the people and the people to Christ. And no other regular act of ministry makes that feel quite like standing in the middle of a busy intersection with all the lights flashing the way preaching does. And that's what's going on on your normal, everyday Sunday morning.

But when we face a major social trauma a whole new set of anxieties surfaces.

"How can I speak a prophetic word that is rooted in God's revelation of Christ, scripture, and church and not imitate the political punditry of the culture?" "How can I speak a word that people receive without triggering so much anger that people stop listening?" "How can I see my sermon notes through my tears.?"

"How do I balance the need for honesty with the overwhelming urge to scream?"

Thank you, Andy Mangum, for your preceptive insight and for being able to put into words that which I feel every time I step into the pulpit. It is so very relevant to our discussion today

What is truth? Smarter men than me, Theologians, Philosophers, Mathematicians and Scientists have all asked that question through the ages. Most of them do not agree with each other. And because these wise and highly intelligent leaders and thinkers can't agree, we are often stuck with the question, "How do we discern what is true?" We are left behind in their discussions about truth, and feel that they do not understand that we value the importance of understanding truth as much as they do. Too many of us look to others to define truth for us and when that fails, we avoid the work of trying to find truth, mostly because we are afraid that any truth that we might come up with will fall far short of the actual truth. None of us want to hinge our lives on half-truths. And, as a way out of that corner that we have boxed ourselves into, too many of us come to the conclusion

that truth is elusive, and beyond our comprehension. I suggest to you that that is a cop out. It's a way of avoiding the question rather than seeking an answer. The biggest problem with this approach with regards to answering the question "What is Truth?" is that there is a tendency to try and fill that void with proclamations that our truth is the only truth that matters. If we say it loud enough over and over again, our truth will become our reality. We know that our lives need deep roots, and if the wind blows too hard and our roots aren't deep enough we start grasping for any truth that we feel will keep us stable and secure.

But I have to tell you that what we perceive of as truth is more often than not, a matter of perspective. You will recognize this story from India, but this is a poem that tells the story and it was written by John Godfrey Saxe in the late 1800's.

It was six men of Indostan,
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The *First* approach'd the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:

"God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!"

The *Second*, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, -"Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 'tis mighty clear,
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!"

The *Third* approach'd the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," -quoth he- "the Elephant
Is very like a snake!"

The *Fourth* reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee:
"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," -quoth he,-
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!"

The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said- "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!"

The *Sixth* no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Then, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," -quoth he,- "the Elephant
Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

MORAL,

So, oft in theologic wars
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean;
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!

For many centuries, it was believed that the world was flat. It was so firmly believed to be true, that it was taught as fact. Even the church put its blessings on the truth that the world was flat. And people who did not believe that the world was flat, were considered foolish because they were obviously wrong, and heretics because they did not accept the teachings of the church. It took a change of perspective to understand that the world was round. And only when we could view the world from space, did we realize that it is actually kind of pear shaped.

For centuries, it was unquestioned truth that the earth was the center of the universe. It was so harshly driven into people that the church would punish anyone who believed otherwise. After all, how could our almighty God place the earth any place but at the center of the universe? Only through our expanding

knowledge of mathematics and science did our perspective change. We began to understand and believe that the sun was actually the center of the universe and that the earth revolved around the sun. And then, the sun was a star. And then, the star we called the Sun, was not at the center of the Milky Way galaxy at all, but closer to the rim. And then, the Milky Way was only one among countless galaxies. And today, we open our minds to the possibilities of multiverse cosmology and multiple dimensions. And none of this will be the total complete picture that is, in actuality, the truth. As long as we base our concept of truth on earthly things and our own perceptions, the actual truth will always be a moving target. We are human. We will never understand the complete workings of this magnificent and wondrous universe that God has created for us.

For most of the history of mankind, we have allowed our religious leaders to tell us what was true and what wasn't. For most of our history, free thinking was not something to be applauded. And when man started to question the truths told by the church because knowledge was increasing and perspectives were changing, then man began to question the very existence of God. After all, if the church was wrong about the earth being flat, maybe they were wrong about a great deal of other things, including the existence of God. For many years, the church kept the written message of the Bible out of the hands of common people. The church believed that the common man was not capable of discerning truth from the scripture. An educated man was a dangerous man and a threat to the church. The common man needed to be led by the nose to the truth that the church

proclaimed, because the church had the voice and ear of God and was infallible. The message of God's love was lost to many generations. God was the great punisher. If a person did anything wrong, God would smite that person. If that person was poor, diseased or in dire straits, then they had done something to offend God or His church and they should be considered as having been smitten by the hand of God.

Today, we hear "Truth" spoken from multiple corners of our environment. From scientists who do not believe in God, to scientists who do believe in God, to religious leaders that believe in science, to religious leaders who reject science as heresy. The elephant is like a rope. The elephant is like a wall. The elephant is like tree. The elephant is like a snake. How in the midst of all this cacophony do we find a way to discern what is actually true? If we are all so fixed on espousing what we feel it true, based on our own limited and misguided perceptions, how do we assemble the puzzle in such a way that we actually find truth? How do we resolve the ambiguity that even if we believe we have right answers, that someone else saying something totally contrary to our beliefs might also have the right answers? What we find, is that when most of us settle on what we believe to be the right answer, we stop looking for truth and accept our limited perception as all that there is. Our statement of truth becomes fact. And we will argue with one another until we are blue in the face believing, that if we shout loud enough to drown out the voices of other opinions, we will win the

argument. That is because what we have settled on as truth means that everyone one else expressing what they believe as truth, is really just opinion.

The discussion in today's scripture is a part of a much longer teaching by Jesus that actually begins with verses 31-32 of John, Chapter 8, verses you are more familiar with:

31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

The question of truth came into play because as Jews, the people saw themselves as children of Abraham and that they had already been freed. They were no longer slaves. But Jesus is not talking about their physical presence, but, instead, their spirits. Many of those involved in this discussion were religious leaders trying to trip Jesus up by having him say something that was in opposition to the teachings of the Jewish leaders. He is very straight forward with them. There is no mincing his words. In verses 37-38 he says:

37 I know that you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because you have no room for my word. (They were shouting and not listening). And Jesus continues:

38 I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you are doing what you have heard from your father. (The father he is referring to here is Satan).

They are claiming their inheritance as children of Abraham and Jesus is trying to explain to them that they have a greater inheritance through God, their Father. They want to lean on their own understanding rather than listen to a voice that has been in the presence of God himself. They are afraid of the truth because the truth may not match either what they already believe or that they have been teaching others. They believe bits and pieces about an elephant they have never seen but refuse to believe in the vision of the elephant from someone who has actually seen the elephant. They much prefer the ambiguity of half truths to having to readjust their thinking and see the truth as it really is. That the elephant is a combination of all the various perceptions. It does not mean that all the different perceptions are wrong or that they are right. Only that each perception has partial validity, some more than others. Jesus doesn't pull any punches on how to discern truth. He tells us in our scripture today:

42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me.

In other words, If you truly believe that God is your Heavenly Father, then you will love Jesus because Jesus was sent by God. Jesus goes on to say:

43 Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say.

You can almost hear the frustration in his voice. He is telling them that He is making the big picture of the elephant as clear as He possibly can and that they are just not paying attention. They have their preconceived notions and they are sticking with them. This is what they were taught. This is what they believe. They will not have the ground shaken under them. To believe what Jesus is saying would mean that they would have to change their perspective and admit that they might not see the whole puzzle.

As long as we allow Satan to whisper half-truths in our ears and we accept those half-truths as the whole truth, we will never be able to hear the truth that God is actually speaking into us. It doesn't mean that any of those half-truths are wrong. A good lie is always built on the foundation of truth. It is easier to swallow it that way. But when we accept half-truths and don't seek greater understanding, we are unable to embrace the big picture that God is trying to show us. It is only through the words of Jesus speaking into us, that we are able to discern truth. Jesus is the filter that lets truth speak into us while filtering out the garbage that Satan wants us to accept.

This week, ask God in your prayers to open your eyes to what is true and let Jesus filter out the lies that Satan tries to feed you. “If God loved you, He wouldn’t let that happen.” “If Jesus was really your friend, He would make you well.” “If the Holy Spirit was real, He would get rid of all the problems that we face on a daily basis.” “That man can’t be right because his skin isn’t the right color.” “That woman doesn’t deserve to express an opinion because she is poor and undeserving of God’s love.” All lies and half-truths.

Jesus made it plain that He is the filter. “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Let the Iron that is Jesus Christ sharpen the iron that is your soul so that you can discern the truth and be free as God intended.

AMEN

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