

Acts of Truth

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The Gospel According to Saint John 14: 1-7

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Last Sunday after our class on poetry and faith, my friend Beth Poe wrote me a note. Beth is one of those people who, I am sure, does not know how much she knows. All of you who have had the privilege of being in classes she has taught know this. After a very generous note of thanks, here's what Beth wrote me:

"One of the most remarkable things about the language of the troubadours is that, by a happy coincidence in the natural evolution of Latin into (and only into that) Romance vernacular, the word for poetry "Vers" ... and the word for ... truth ... are one and the same." Poetry/truth.

This got me to thinking about truth and one of the favorite quotes for preachers of my generation. The quote was first uttered almost exactly one hundred years ago by the Reformed theologian Karl Barth, before he became a famous theologian, when he was still a pastor. He said that on Sunday mornings, when church bells ring and people come to worship, they enter the doors of the church with one question on their minds. It is the one insistent question which demands an answer: "Is it true?"

For an intellectually skeptical population, and I confess that through most of my life I have been part of that gaggle, "Is it true?" seemed to be a question about the supernatural aspects of the gospel. Maybe that's what Barth meant too.

But it was the great American philosopher and psychologist, William James, who completely changed my thinking about this question several years ago.

I still remember where I was at the moment this insight broke through. Debbie and I were in Vancouver, British Columbia, one of the most beautiful cities in the world. I was teaching a summer school course for Regents College on "The Future of the Church."

The air in Vancouver was light and crisp, and lavender scented. I was sitting in the college coffee shop reading after class one day a brilliant book by A. N. Wilson, titled "God's Funeral." It's about the retreat of religious faith in Britain during the age of the scientific revolution. Toward the end of his book, Wilson provides a brilliant analysis of William James' thoughts on religious faith.

And sitting there, I realized that my mind and heart were captivated both with a new vision of God and of what truth means.

First, William James exploded by charming but stuffy parlor theology of the Triune God as a sort of cozy Victorian family, replacing it with a vision of God as the inconceivable Being of beings whose creative love and energy is expressed through what James calls "the Multiverse." And, then, my whole idea of truth was revolutionized when James said that a

true religion is one that shapes us into the human beings that faith believes to be true humanity. If a religious faith doesn't achieve that goal, no matter what it aspires to believe, it isn't true.

I still get goose bumps thinking about that moment. Truth is more about the character of a human life lived out in acts of grace and generosity than it is the logical consistency of a set of ideas or their correspondence to some set of observations. Of course, this is truth too. And we shouldn't lose it. Facts matter. But if we want to know if our faith is true, we need to look at whether our lives tell the truth.

Suddenly, a phrase came into focus: there's such a thing as "acts of truth."

An old story is told in India of a small boy playing in the tall grass near his home far out in the countryside. A snake is disturbed by the boy's presence. It strikes and bites him on the leg. The boy screams and is immediately violently sick. His father and mother rush to the boy just in time to see the snake slither off.

The situation is dire. The family lives in a town a long distance from any great city or hospital. They have a cart into which they place the boy. And they rush off to the nearest shrine, tended by a holy man. They tell the holy man that there's no way they can get to a hospital in time to save their little son. Please, they say, please save his life. But the holy man says, "I am an attendant upon the shrine, but I am not a healer."

The father says, but isn't it said in the sacred wisdom that acts of truth can heal?

Yes, the holy man said, this is true.

Well, perform an act of truth.

The holy man approached the boy, who was unconscious by now, his little body sweating, his leg swollen beyond belief.

Placing his hands upon the boy's head, the holy man says, I must be true. I am a fraud, not holy at all. In the evenings, I often slip away from the shrine to a nearby town where I am not known. There I eat in the market, and drink to excess, and engage in disgraceful acts. Before dawn, I stumble back here drunk, satiated, to slumber. And I pretend to be what I wish I were.

After the holy man confesses, the small boy shudders and takes a deep, deep gulp of air, his lungs filling, his eyes opening, his little body jerking forward. The three adults sigh. But, as the boy collapses back, it is obvious that he can neither move his arms nor legs.

Another act of truth is required, said the holy man.

Trembling, the boy's father kneels and places his hands on the boy's chest. He says, Everyone in town sees me as a good man, a trust-worthy man, an important and wise man of influence to whom they often come for advice. What they do not know is that I am a hypocrite.

Pretending to be generous, in fact I am greedy and selfish. My wealth exist for my indulgences. Much of my wealth has been gained through deception. As an act of truth, I confess this.

After confessing, he places his head on his son's chest and begins to weep. At which, the paralysis in his son's arms vanishes, and the boy begins gently to stroke his father's head with his hand. But when the boy tries to move his legs, nothing happens.

Another act of truth is required, said the holy man.

The mother bends down beside her husband and places her hands on the boy's legs. I confess, she says, that I love my son more than anything else in all the world. But I have no love for his father. Our marriage is a lie. My life has become empty of love, hollowed out, a drudgery. My husband's acquisitions and his seeking after more have become his mistress. I sit alone and cry for the marriage that might have been. May my act of truth heal you, my son.

At this the boy's toes began to move. But the mother, still holding his legs, looks at her husband and says: By my act of truth, may our marriage be healed. And the father looking at his wife, said, and by my act of truth, may I become the loving husband and father and good man I pretend to be.

The boy stood, healed and whole. As the family prepared to leave the shrine, the disgraced holy man stands silent. But the father turns and says to him, is it not also said in the sacred wisdom, that acts of truth can only heal under the care of a great and true holy man? At which the family departs.*

Poor Doubting Thomas stars in our gospel text today. Thomas gets used in the gospels for all the post-resurrection dirty work. *"I won't believe that Jesus has risen from the dead till I stick my fingers into the holes the nails made."* *"I don't know where you are going Lord."* He speaks the words that other disciples are afraid to say, but I'm sure they are thinking.

Instead of Doubting Thomas, I reckon he should be called, "Thomas the Bold." Or, maybe that's not right either. But this much I know, Thomas isn't a doubter, he's a literalist. He's thinking about nail prints when God has just turned all reality upside down. He's thinking about roads leading out of Jerusalem, when Jesus is talking about a new way of living: the way, truth, life way of living that is a sharing in the character of God, so that people will look at Jesus's followers and say about them, "Gosh, they sure favor God." They forgive. They reconcile. They heal. They teach. Such, of course, is the story told in The Acts of the Apostles.

So many people love to use this passage from John's Gospel to try to exclude from God's family those who don't share their set of religious ideas or beliefs about God. But that's not what this passage is about. Thomas isn't the only literalist in the Christian family.

Suddenly in this passage, we see drawn together all the elements of faith and truth in the gospel story. Jesus, whom we believe to be the Christ, is the way, the truth, and the life. It is through him and his spirit that we gain access to this way of being. Those three — way, truth, life — are not separate things: the way, the truth and the life are aspects of the singular reality to which Jesus invites us: *the way truth is lived*. If we want to experience God as father, we live as God's children.

This passage isn't slamming doors in the face of those who don't share a set of metaphysical propositions with us, or who have been brought up in another religious faith; this passage opens the doors wide to share a way of life that is the true.

Is it true? We do come to church asking that question.

This is not a question for the head but for the heart, and for the hands, and for the feet to answer. What begins in confession culminates in healing.

Amen

This story comes from the storyteller Michael Meade, founder of the Mosaic Multicultural Foundation, as told by Jack Kornfield on his HeartWisdom podcast.