

Whatever Is True
Philippians 4:1-9
Rev. Peter Sawtell at First Plymouth – 10/9/11

I don't think I would want to have the Apostle Paul as a personal friend. He seems far, far, far too willing to give detailed instructions about what his acquaintances should do.

You heard him: Stand firm in the Lord. You two women, stop bickering. Rejoice. Don't worry about anything. And beyond that – he wrote, in the sentence that I'm going to focus on – beyond all that, “whatever is true, honorable, just, pleasing, etc, etc, etc, think about these things.” And then look at me for a good example.

One commentator wrote about Paul's frequent use of a “staccato” list of instructions. I confess to a temptation to run quickly through such a laundry list, and set them aside. But this week, I've been drawn into this list of virtues, and especially “whatever is true.” I've had a string of ecumenical experiences that has shown me the complexity of Paul's advice about whatever is true.

A week ago, I was here at First Plymouth, and I heard George's wonderful sermon about the importance of Sabbath. He lifted up the practical and spiritual truth of our frantic lives, and critiqued the social values that turn us from happiness. After worship, I met with a class to discuss this congregation's wide ranging environmental leadership in the almost two decades since you voted to be a Whole Earth Church. Last Sunday gave me a lovely taste of what is true, just and commendable.

Then, on Monday, I dared to venture to a worship service at Denver Seminary – a Conservative Baptist institution. I was enticed there by a visiting speaker of national prominence in the Evangelical side of the Christian environmental movement. It was fascinating to hear Dr. Sleeth drive home the point that caring for creation is an urgent and scriptural mandate.

In the discussion that followed, one of the students raised a question: “But, Dr. Sleeth, most of those environmentalists are not Christians, and some of them are pantheists! Surely we can't cooperate with them!” (There's a different take on “whatever is true and pure.”) The speaker had a good response. He said we need to worry more about the huge numbers of people who worship every week at the football stadium than we do about the few people who worship trees.

Toward the end of the week, I was in Grand Junction for the annual conference of the Colorado Episcopal Diocese. Their opening worship service was full of pomp and ceremony. Bishop O'Neill presided in his elaborate robe, wearing his golden miter. Surprisingly, he began his sermon with a lesson about basic physics. He described Newton's first law: an object at rest will stay at rest, and an object in motion will stay in motion, unless it is acted on by an outside force. He developed the scientific truth about inertia, and extended that truth to make a similar point about churches. A church at rest will stay at rest, and a church in motion will continue in motion – even if it is headed in the wrong direction. And it takes a substantial force to influence the inertia of churches!

And now, here I am, back at First Plymouth. I'm experiencing a severe case of ecclesiastical whiplash. I've been bouncing around between the theological extremes of the church – Evangelical, Episcopal and UCC – three very different perspectives and practices.

I come to the end of this week with a very serious question. What is it that we might consider that is true, honorable, just and pure?

Is that truth defined by a locked-in notion of obedience to scripture? Is it shaped by traditions and rituals that have enormous inertia? How is our notion of what is true and good influenced by cultural values and science?

Where do we find truth? Where do we discern what is most valuable? That is, and it always has been, a critical question in all churches.

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When I settled down to research the Philippians passage, I learned that Paul's staccato list of virtues employs words and concepts that he never uses in his other writings.

Paul almost always harps on the difference between Christian faith and Jewish belief, and he certainly doesn't show any fondness for the religions of Greece and Rome. Stand firm in the Lord, he tells the Philippians. But then he throws in a list of the virtues that were affirmed by the Stoic philosophers of Greece: truth, honor, justice, purity, excellence.

Rejoice in the Lord always. But beyond that, consider what the Stoics have to say. Because Paul did know that truth can be found outside the church.

That is a message that the student at Denver Seminary needs to hear. If those secular, pantheistic environmentalists reveal truth and justice, if they are doing anything worthy of praise, then think on that. Let your faith be stretched and challenged from surprising sources.

As Bishop O'Neill told his flock, Isaac Newton did speak truthfully about inertia and the properties of moving or inert objects. It is completely appropriate to see the qualities of inertia both in a rolling ball and a church that will not change course – even though it is harder to measure church inertia.

Whatever is true, think about these things. Because truth comes from many sources.

In one of the commentaries that I read on Paul's writings, Marcus Bockmuehl said this about Paul's surprising affirmation of the Greek virtues: "All truth is God's truth; conversely, God's truth in Christ describes the world as it truly is or is meant to be."

When I read that, I thought immediately of a very similar statement by environmental theologian Sallie McFague – an affirmation that was very helpful in shaping my thinking a few years ago. Sallie wrote, "I finally understand what life is about. It is, quite simply, acknowledging how

things are – living in the truth. And the truth is that God is the source and sustainer of everything." She makes the bold statement "that God is reality, the breath, the life, the power, the love beneath, above, around, and in everything."

From Paul in the Bible, and from two contemporary sources, we hear the joyful news that all truth is God's truth, because if it is true, it is of God. A lovely thought!

But ... how do we sort out what is true, from the many things that are not true? Paul didn't say to adopt everything that the Greeks thought or did. If it seems to be true or pure, then think on it. Check it out, but cautiously.

As we try and make sense out of truth and non-truth, it seems to me that we need to deal with three categories. My three-fold list is certainly colored by the fact that I have an environmental fixation, and that today is listed as a "Whole Earth Sunday" at First Plymouth, but these categories are not unique to that.

First, there are things like scientific truths, our best and most honest understandings about the world and how it works.

There is truth in Newton's laws about inertia. There is truth in what he figured out about gravity: a constant force of attraction hold us onto the planet, holds together solar systems, and shapes galaxies. Countless other scientists have teased out truth in the physical laws that determine the flow of heat and energy. They have described the chemical bonds that join elements into molecules.

There is truth in what we have fairly recently come to discover about evolution and ecological relationships – that we are bound together in an amazing, intricate, delicate and ever-changing web of life. We are a part of the creation, dependant upon the health and diversity of that network of relationships.

There is truth in the insights of sociology about the web of human relationships, the personal and social connections that shape and sustain us.

These are truths that are available and accessible to all people. They can be discerned by research and observation and deduction. Those are among the truths that Paul was affirming through his list of Stoic virtues. This is the sort of reality that Sallie McFague named when writing about "how things are".

There is **a second kind of truth** – the kind that Paul usually talks about, and that we hear proclaimed in sermons. These are religious truths that only make sense within the context of our faith tradition. They can only be seen as true when they are hooked into a religious world view.

One of the core affirmations that I come back to over and over again in my work is that "God wills shalom for the world." God seeks peace with justice that encompasses all of creation. To me, that is a foundational religious truth. But if you don't think that there is some sort of divine will at work in the world, then my truth is a nonsensical statement. Or, if your theology says that

God's will is to destroy this world and to extract a select few saints to go live in heaven, then my fixation on shalom isn't going to sound true.

Shalom is not a truth that can be deduced by any impartial observer. It is a faith claim, grounded in our theology and religious experience. Christianity is deeply divided because we don't all agree about what our faith says is true.

And then there is a **third category** which may contain truth – I'll call it cultural truth. Even as I am often seduced by it, I tend to be much more suspicious of what gets lifted up as true and indisputable by our culture.

Certainly, there is much that is true and honorable and commendable within our culture. To pick one, freedom is a cornerstone of our society, both personally and institutionally. Progressive Christianity has usually seen a very close connection between what we lift up as religiously true and our cultural virtues of freedom, choice and democracy.

But there are many things that our culture insists on that are not true. They contradict other truths – both scientific and religious.

Our society and our economy are built on the proposition that perpetual growth is good and essential. "If you're not growing, you're dying" is a proverb of the business world. Our economy does not function unless we have constant growth in consumption and affluence. But that cultural truth contradicts the scientific truth that we live in a finite world, and that we cannot continue to consume and pollute at increasing rates. It just cannot be done. And the doctrine of growth, and of insatiable appetites, contradicts our foundational religious truths about sufficiency, sharing, gratitude, and the nature of a good and faithful life.

Our culture lifts up as true and real certain things about our political system that are partial truths, at best. However frustrating they might be for us, the processes of political compromise and conflict get labeled as "the way things are." We are told to be "realistic" about what politics can do. We should not hope for things that the interest groups and political parties can't achieve.

Bill McKibben, an outspoken activist on behalf of the global climate, has written about the way political truth conflicts with scientific truth. He says that the politicians and diplomats think we can negotiate with nature the same way we negotiate with our political opponents.

Many of the leading climate scientists tell us that 350 part per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is the highest we can go and still have a stable climate. The economists tell us that preserving growth means that we need to push CO2 levels to 600 or 800 ppm. The politicians look for a compromise, and have proposed plans that might stabilize things at 500 ppm.

The problem with doing that, McKibben says, is the chemistry and the physics. He wrote that the physics and the chemistry "don't give us much time, and they're bad at haggling. ... Political reality is hard to change ... But physics and chemistry are downright impossible to shift. Physics and chemistry don't bargain. So the President, and all the rest of us, had really better try a little harder."

When political reality does not mesh with scientific reality, it is our culture that is wrong. The workings of those scientific laws are part of the undisputable truth, the open-to-all truth, that Paul urged his folk to consider.

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For the church in every time, it has been a challenge to sort out what is true, just and excellent. The church through the ages, and the church today, has to grapple with different realms and different kinds of truth.

- There is the common truth, made known to all, that we find in our best scientific understandings about how the world works.
- There are religious and philosophical truths. As Christians, we affirm love, grace, shalom, peace with justice, and compassion.
- There are truths that are foundational to various cultures, which may or may not stand up well to testing and scrutiny.

When Paul urges us to ponder “whatever is true”, that does not make life easier for us. We are thrown into the midst of complication and discernment. It is not an easy task, but that ongoing work of discernment is a faithful endeavor.

Our United Church of Christ has a slogan, “God is still speaking”, which gets to the heart of our task. God’s truth is breaking forth around us in new ways – as we take a fresh look at our own religious traditions and practices, as we take seriously the findings of science, and as we evaluate our own culture.

We often say that God is still speaking in relation to our denominations style of extravagant inclusion. George will be talking next week about Open and Affirming declarations in the UCC. I’ll just comment today that our wrestling with gender issues have called us ponder truth and falsehood in our faith traditions, in scientific findings, and in cultural trends. In our ONA stances, the UCC has taken Paul’s challenge – to discern whatever is true – and to let it shape our faith and practice.

In today’s world, we must also deal with the truth that comes together in what the UCC has called “Whole Earth.” We have heard new facts from ecologists and physicists. We see widespread damage to the environment, locally and globally. There is abundant and frightening evidence that the fabric of God’s creation is unraveling. The need to discern what is really true and just is urgent. Science and theology agree that the ultimate truth is about a thriving creation, not one that is exploited, destabilized and destroyed. Our culture, which depends on the depletion and abuse of creation, is not true.

Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, think on these things. There are no easy answers. We have to look outside our traditional faith, look outside the bounds of our culture, and be open to new insights from science.

We can't pretend – as the Denver Seminary student did – that one branch of the Christian church has all of the answers. We have to admit – as Bishop O'Neill did – that the inertia of churches blocks us from discerning and living God's truth. We must be willing – as First Plymouth and our United Church of Christ have been willing – to wrestle with difficult questions of justice and gender and ecology.

Here at First Plymouth, the word “transformation” is being used more often. The sense in which we're using it has to do with discerning new truths, and it has to do with turning away from what is not true.

The Whole Earth group, and your pastor, and many other respected leaders are calling this congregation to look at the way we live – personally, in this church, and as a society. The painful reality is what the evangelical speaker Matthew Sleeth named at Denver Seminary: because of our way of life, the world is dying. To live in God's truth, we must change – not just change light bulbs, but change our values, and our vision of what defines the good life.

First Plymouth is daring to consider transformational ministry – to consider what really is true and good, to name what is false, and to help us find the joy in telling new stories about who we are as members of God's creation. This congregation is doing a deeply faithful and absolutely essential thing. Rather than settling comfortably into established doctrines and rituals, rather than blessing the destructive values of our culture, First Plymouth is seeking the kind of truth that shakes up our faith, our society and our lives. In that process, you will find grace and healing for each person, and for all creation.

I thank you, and I honor you, and I join with you in that transformative work of finding and living the truth.