

Before Our Eyes

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:

John 18:33–38

I remember the first time I was in a room with my wife, Bonnie Mohan. It was 2006. I was in seminary, and she was still in college. We were at a meeting of restaurant workers in New York City. It was years before we'd start dating, years before all the ups and downs of young love, a decade before we'd get married—but there we were, in a room together.

Bonnie was writing her thesis on the restaurant industry, and she remembers “not considering you a dating prospect at all, but being flattered that you were interested in my thesis.” What I remember best, for some reason, is her shoes. She was wearing a pair of black low-top Converse sneakers. What can I say? I'm an observant Romantic.

Isn't that something though? There we were right in front of one another's faces. Our whole future, our family was right there in front of us, but we couldn't see it yet. We just had no idea what was in store

for us. But how could we, right? It takes time for these kinds of things to work themselves out. It takes time to come to terms with the truth.

The post-truth era—that's the disturbing new phrase in use at the moment. The post-truth world. And, it seems pretty accurate, right? After all, who among us has not facepalmed themselves and prayed to be teleported to another planet when they've heard powerful and influential people using a phrase like "alternative facts" or saying "Truth isn't truth." Pontius Pilate has nothing on these people. They've taken it to a new level.

Still, even looking good by comparison, Pilate is by no means an admirable character, right? But I do feel some sympathy for him for this reason: He had God there right in front of him. He got to speak with Jesus. He was in the room! But he wasn't able to recognize it. He didn't realize what was before him. He didn't take advantage of it. It can take time for the truth of things to break through to us. But Pilate wasn't really open to dialogue. Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" then turns around and leaves. It was not an invitation to deeper conversation or relationship, it was a rhetorical question designed to underline the fact that Pilate's interests and concerns in life aren't organized around anything like "the truth."

Which, we've observed lately, is a sad and dangerous way to live. Consider again our "post-truth" world. Is the situation that we've all become a bunch of enlightened postmodernists who totally agree that there is "no truth" and everything is relative and therefore we should all try to accept one another's differences and just get along. Not even close! We're clinging to our own tribe's "truths" as tightly as we ever have. But the idea that the capital-t Truth is something greater than ourselves which we must discover, which we must align ourselves to in order to lead a good life is being lost.

Instead, my truth, my tribe's agenda, my party's line is used to close our ears to the discussion, walk out on our neighbors, close our hearts to the pull of something bigger than ourselves. The idea that there is "no truth" is just a narrative designed to stop the healthy discussion of truth and the communal striving for truth that have always been at the heart of human community.

I think it's possible to believe in the idea of the truth, but also to live humbly enough to admit that you can't get to the truth all by yourself. I believe in a truth that is so much bigger than me—than any of us—that none of us is ever always right about it, and we can all learn something from others. It's possible to have a relationship with God that doesn't preclude anyone else, that puts you in the arms of truth but not upon the judgment seat of truth. The fullness of that truth will unfold over lifetimes, over generations, as long as God is still speaking and people are still listening, the truth may yet surprise us, sneak up on us. Don't be like Pilate. Don't give up on the truth. Don't believe that there's any such thing as a post-truth era. Nonsense! There's always truth. Sometimes it just takes a while for us to see what's right in front of our face.

Three years ago this week, Bonnie and I were helping my mom and dad prep the turkey and stuffing the night before Thanksgiving. Dad was telling us about their church. The new pastor had just started in September and was doing a great job. Everyone was feeling hopeful and like the place had a little more life in it.

This is the church I grew up in and the church my dad's been going to since he was five-years old, so he cares about it, and he cares for it a lot. He told us how he spent most of the summer, with some other men from church and a few buddies he recruited, getting the church ready for the new pastor—renovating the church office and all the Sunday School classrooms. There hadn't been many kids at all using those classrooms for the last few years, but this was their way of saying to their new pastor on his very first day of work—we're ready for you. We're ready for everything God's bringing to our church. We're ready for the risk of progress.

I don't think there's a room in that church or anywhere on the property that Dad hasn't had some hand in making better. And there's not a room in that church that doesn't hold some deep memory for my dad—memories of his mom and dad, memories of childhood, memories of his wedding day, of his children's baptisms. Ask my dad, "Who are you?" and one answer would be a member Woodbury Union Church. Ask my dad, "What is truth?" and he'd think it over for a while—probably while mowing the lawn, or fixing the boiler, or installing new windows at the church.

The turkey was about half stuffed when my dad got a call. All of a sudden, he's shouting into the phone: "Are you joking?" "Can I do anything?" He gets off the phone and he tells us, "The church is on fire."

So, we drive over, of course. We could see the emergency lights flashing from way down the road. We had to park a few blocks away because traffic was blocked off. As we walked up, all of a sudden there it was right in front of our eyes—an undeniable, knock-you-down truth: Three firetrucks were raining water down on the smoking ruin of what used to be our church. The roof was gone, the steeple had collapsed, the windows were all blown out.

And then there were other people from church all around us and the neighbors were all out too, watching, and talking, and parishioners and pastors from other nearby churches came out to see what they could do. There was nothing we could do, really, except be there with one another. And so that's what we did.

We were freezing. It was an arctic snap and people had rushed out their doors without the right gear on, so we all huddled together on the sidewalk—hugging, crying, sharing information, and theories, and handwarmers someone had stashed in their car, and photos and videos on our phones of fire filling the sky over the church as it burned.

When the flames were finally all out, we asked the firefighters about the damage inside. The fire had gutted most of the sanctuary and upstairs offices, most of the roof had collapsed, and there was now seven feet of water standing in the basement fellowship hall and meeting rooms. It was going to be a total loss. And it got awful quiet.

The local news trucks were all there. And they interviewed the new pastor, TJ. He says to the cameras, "We're going to be fine. The church isn't a building. It's the people." He was right. In one sense, the only truth we should have cared about was burning and collapsing right in front of our eyes. We were all too aware of it. We couldn't get away from it. But Pastor TJ was reminding us that sometimes we need to remember that not all truth jumps out and bites you. We have a responsibility to God's quieter truth—not to let it go overlooked because there's a loudmouth taking up all the oxygen. Pastor TJ in front of the burning church reminded us that there was an equally relevant and fundamentally greater truth that was also right in front of us: that the Kingdom of God can look like a shivering crowd of friends and neighbors sharing the sidewalk and their lives together in the face of tragedy. No disembodied, intellectual idea of what is true can provide any of us any comfort when our lives are going up in smoke. But a few friends gathered together can make all the difference. And that's what a church really is, isn't it?

I believe in the truth. I don't always think I know everything, but I believe in the truth because I believe that when we love and listen to one another we get closer to the truth. And I realized something when the church burned down: that the heart of community, the heart of our hopes and dreams and loves, cannot be destroyed by fire. The only thing that can destroy the heart of a community is if we were to turn our backs on one another and end the conversation. The true heart of the church, the heart of it all, is contained within us.

Beloved, it's right here before our eyes. Can you see it? Well, maybe you can, maybe you can't. Sometimes, it takes time to see it. Sometimes tragedy strikes and everything gets messed up and we lose sight of it for a while. But, Beloved, you've gotta believe it's there—the truth, the heart, it is there. Don't give up on it! Stay in the conversation, stay in the community, stay invested! It's right before our eyes. It's all around us. It's the heart of it all. I'm glad I'm in it. Aren't you?