

Enough for Now

John 16:12-5

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

What do you do when someone asks you a question about your faith - a really good question - the kind that you don't have an answer for? How do you typically respond? How do you feel? What do you say?

Perhaps you feel anxious, like you're suddenly on the spot and so you try to answer, but it doesn't come out right and you end up saying something like, "Uh, I don't think I'm explaining it right. I'm confused now. Here, maybe you should just read this book."

Or perhaps you feel embarrassed or intellectually inferior, and so all you can manage to say is, "Well, I don't know. That's just what I believe."

Or perhaps you feel annoyed that the other person is breaking the cardinal rule of polite conversation—don't talk about religion or politics—and so you start looking for a way to change the subject or to kindly excuse yourself.

I can tell you that when someone asks me a theological question that I don't have an answer for, I tend to get anxious, because I like to be the answer man. Especially after five years in seminary, I feel like I should have some answers. But the thing about theology is that it's full of questions for which there are no clear answers. So I'm having to learn how to sit with questions a little longer than I would normally be inclined.

For instance, the other day a friend of mine asked, "How do I know that the Bible is the Word of God?" Now, I can give you a decent explanation of where the biblical text comes from, and I can suggest several clues to the Bible's divine inspiration, but ultimately there are no answers to that question that don't rely on circular logic. As John Calvin said, "God alone can properly bear witness to (God's) own words."¹ So I said to my friend, "Yup, that's a good question. We can talk about the reliability of the Bible, but the only way to truly know it's the Word of God is to hear God speaking in it."

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, vii, 4 (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iii.viii.html>).

Or to use a more pertinent example for today, “How am I supposed to believe in a God who is three in one?” (I once heard a preacher say that a lot of Christians have the attitude that God is essentially one, unfortunately triune.) Now, I can point you to the biblical texts that suggest God is Trinity. Today’s text is one of them. But the word Trinity never shows up in the New Testament, and there are really no good analogies for the Trinity that don’t represent some heresy or another which the Church explicitly rejected in the first few centuries of its existence. The Trinity is simply the boundary the Church has established for how to speak truthfully about God.

Our faith is full of questions for which we have no clear answers or explanations. I suppose that’s why we call it faith. But then we might well wonder what Jesus means when he says “when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth”². Last week we celebrated the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, and yet with so many unanswered questions, it might be difficult to trust that the Spirit is still at work guiding us into all the truth. Some of the truth, maybe. A few keys truths—yeah, I can go for that. But all the truth?

Our faith is full of questions for which we have no clear answers, and this has led some to go as far as to say that there is no truth at all, at least not Truth with a capital “T.” Later on in the Gospel of John, when Jesus is standing trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus says to Pilate, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth”³. Pilate responds, “What is truth?”. Many have abandoned the search for truth altogether, or at least some of the ultimate truths that the Christian faith professes. To them, the words “faith” and “truth” are simply incompatible.

There was a man I used to work with at a secular organization who would ask me all kinds of questions about my faith. Having been raised Catholic, he was now struggling to make the faith his own as an adult, but he just couldn’t bring himself to believe in several key Christian doctrines. One day he was asking me about the doctrine of the virgin birth when another coworker interrupted us. “Would you guys quit talking about that?” she said. “I just think that everyone has their own beliefs and no one can say who’s right and who’s wrong. You can’t criticize other people’s beliefs.” My other coworker looked at this woman, looked at me, looked back at her. And then he said, “OK, I may not believe what Noel believes, but I don’t believe that either!”

² John 16:13

³ John 18:27

The thing is, that woman's position is not all that uncommon. For many people, that's the best we can hope for. In lieu of any more certain answers to the questions we might have, the best we can say is, I've got my beliefs, you've got yours. Who's to say what's true? Besides, what is truth, anyway?

“When the Spirit of truth comes,” Jesus says, “he will guide you into all the truth.” Even for those of us who still want to talk about truth in the same sentence as we talk about faith, this phrase, “all the truth,” might be a little hard to swallow. We might not have a problem acknowledging that we know some truth. But all the truth? Not hardly. And we've rightly learned to be suspicious of those people who think that they do in fact have all the truth and are all too happy to share it with us.

Given all our unanswered questions, given all the people who have stopped believing in spiritual truth altogether, given all the people who think that they have all the truth when they clearly don't, what might Jesus' promise mean for us: “the Spirit of truth will guide you into all the truth”?

I think there's a clue in the verb, “guide.” We're often inclined to think of truth as something static, like individual bricks in a great building of knowledge that we're building with our own hands, brick by brick. But in the Gospel of John, truth is something active, like a path that gets you to a destination. Earlier in the same Gospel, Jesus says, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will (set) you free”⁴.

If we think of truth as something static like a brick, we'll be inclined to think of the Spirit as the distributor of those bricks—the bricks being the answers to all our tough questions, of course. And then we'll start to get impatient, waiting for the next brick delivery to come, because we want to build the biggest building in town so that everyone will know that we have the truth. But if we think of truth as something active, we'll be more inclined to acknowledge its provisional nature. Truth is related to where we are and where we're going.

Truth answers not every question, but one specific question: how might we continue to follow Jesus in this time and place? We're on a need-to-know basis, and there are just some things we don't need to know right now. Our job as disciples is not to know everything but rather to listen to the Spirit and to trust that the Spirit is guiding us

⁴ John 8:31-2

to a place of freedom, and life and bliss. Truth is not static but active. It's related to where we are, where we're going, and what we need to know in order to take the next step. It might actually be for our own good that we don't know some of the things we don't know right now. Remember what Jesus says: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come"⁵. It might be for our own good that we don't know some of the things we don't know, because we might not be able to bear them right now. Our job as disciples is not to know everything, but to follow Jesus, one step at a time, and to trust that the truth God has given us up to this point is enough for now.

When I was a young boy, I used to love to challenge my father to footraces, and he was always happy to oblige. But my father knew that I would have quickly become discouraged if he had actually run as fast as he could beating me every time. So he would match my fastest pace, sometimes staying out in front of me, sometimes letting me get out in front of him, but never blowing right by me at his own faster pace. I'm sure I wondered in the back of my mind whether or not I was truly as fast as he was, but I was having so much fun racing him that I didn't wonder about it too much.

Then one day I was watching my father play in a church softball game. He was on first base when the batter hit a line drive through the outfield gap. My father tore around second base and was getting waved home by the third base coach, so he rounded third base and headed home at a speed I had never seen before. He slid into home just ahead of the throw. Safe. As we were all crowding him and he was trying to catch his breath, he said to me, "I bet you never knew your old man could run like that." I didn't know. If I would have known, I couldn't have borne it at the time.

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. ... He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you"⁶

Are you able to trust this morning that the truth the Spirit has declared to you is enough for now? Is it possible that some of the things you don't know right now might be for your own good, either because they would be too overwhelming or simply incomprehensible?

⁵ John 16:12-3

⁶ John 16:12-4

Especially on Memorial Day weekend, I think of the families who have sent their loved ones off to war, never to see them alive again. If they had known what was going to happen, could they have let them go? And what about the question of why? True, they died for their country, but why my husband, my daughter, my grandson? Even more basic, why does there have to be war at all? Could the answer to those questions ever be comprehensible to us this side of eternity?

The truth is active, it's provisional, it's related to where we are, where we're going, and what we need to know in order to take the next step. But even more than that, the good news is that the truth is also personal, because Jesus himself is Truth with a capital "T". In John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." The truth is not only a path we take, it's a person we meet. Jesus himself is the path, and the truth, and the life. When we meet Jesus, we meet the Truth in person. We can believe that the truth we have is enough for now because we can trust that the person of Jesus is enough for now.

Actually, the witness of the saints is that the person of Jesus is so much more than we could ever hope or imagine—that in Jesus is life, and hope, and peace, and joy. And yet by faith that Truth is here to meet us this morning, as the Spirit takes what the Father has given the Son and declares it to us. So receive now the Holy Spirit, encounter the Truth in Jesus, and feel the love of God washing over you and giving you what you need to take your next step. To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Unless otherwise noted, biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, copyright 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.