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Presbyterian Principles: Truth is in order to goodness

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1 John 3:16-24

We're on the second Sunday of a three-part series exploring what are called *The Historic Principles of Church Order*. They were adopted by the Presbyterian Church more than two centuries ago. Our forebears set out to build Christian community on these basic tenets of faith. The principles served – *and still serve* – as the foundation of the values we hold dear and which we embrace as followers of Jesus.

We may be tempted to dismiss a set of ethics adopted in the late 18th century as anachronistic or irrelevant. But give them a chance and it becomes clear they still speak to us. Last week we looked at this historic principle: *God alone is Lord of the conscience* – meaning that in the mind and heart of a Christian, *God's love* is the ultimate guide for how we live.

Today we look at another assertion upon which our Church stands: *Truth is in order to goodness*. When I first read this in our denomination's constitution many years

ago, I didn't understand it. It refers to *one thing* that follows *another*. To say *truth is in order to goodness* means that *goodness results from following the truth*. Truth leads to goodness.

Could any old-time principle be more appropriate for our time today, when lies and illusions abound in our public life, and mendacity doesn't even bother to masquerade? Could any principle be more apt for our time than this one? *Truth is in order to goodness*.

When Jesus was before Pilate, only hours before his crucifixion, the Roman governor was probing him, trying to learn who he was, and the motivation for what he did. Jesus finally tells him,

“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, *to testify to the truth*. *Everyone who belongs to the truth* listens to my voice.” (John 18:37)

As followers of Jesus, we ought to be known as *those who belong to the truth*, who refuse to follow falsehood. If we belong to the truth, our lives bear witness to what is good and honest, right and just. Our actions and our integrity point others to the truth.

But how do we know what is true? “The great touchstone of truth,” according to those 18th century Presbyterians, is “Its tendency to promote holiness.”

By “holiness” they meant life that reflects the love and righteousness, the light and justice of God.

Our forebears went on to declare,

“No opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level.”

Truth is in order to goodness.

Jesus couldn't agree more: “You will know them by their fruits,” he said. “Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles?” (Matthew 7:16)

A few years ago, we chuckled at the notion of *truthiness* in our political and cultural ethos. That was then, and this is now, and it is no longer a laughing matter. With new technology the world of “alternative facts” has scaled up beyond anything we could ever have imagined. To quote Dorothy, “Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.”

In an interview this week, Dr. Jeffery Hinton, known as the “godfather” of artificial intelligence, was asked about

the benefits and risks of AI. AI, he said, can be a force for astonishing good.

“Would you rather see a family doctor that has seen a few thousand patients or a family doctor that has seen a few hundred million patients, including with the same rare disease you have?”

A benefit of AI.

But, as we have been hearing a lot these days, there's a deep shadow side to AI. At a recent UN conference on the risks of technology, a participant said, “AI can bring with it a host of unintended consequences. One of the most pernicious could be AI's ability to spread misinformation at a pace and scale not seen before.” (<https://aiforgood.itu.int/ai-is-helping-spread-misinformation-faster-how-can-we-deal-with-that/>)

Pernicious is the very word Presbyterians used 235 years ago to describe bringing “truth and falsehood upon a level.” It carries the connotation of malevolence. The use of this technology – not the technology itself – can be detrimental to our life together, even sinister.

Dr. Hinton recently left Google to speak out about the threats in the use of the technology he spent decades developing. The first danger he cites is “the risk of producing a lot of fake news so no one knows what's true anymore.” (<https://www.pbs.org/video/the-future-of-ai-1683317973/>)

This has gone way beyond a mere press conference where someone claims something we all know to be false, and it begins to spread by people repeating and believing it.

Jesus was acutely aware of the power of what is true. “You shall know the truth,” he said, “And the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32)

But in an age when unregulated and unrestrained technology can easily be used to spread that which is untrue and present it as gospel – and I use that word intentionally – we will soon lose our freedom.

If *truth is in order to goodness*, when much of the world is filtered through and controlled by AI can we even know what is true?

By ourselves we cannot stop the malicious use of technology, but we *can* be careful with it and check its veracity when in doubt. We can use technology to verify the accuracy of technology. We can discern what is true *and* decide what we will do about it – even if that truth is painful or difficult to face in our personal lives, in our families and our relationships, in our city and nation today, and in its history. The truth can be hard to hear, but you and I, we are bound to pursue it and act on it. A statement by the national church 40 years ago, in 1983, says,

“As Presbyterians we believe there is...no way to disconnect faith from practice. What we believe is reflected in our actions, both individually and corporately. Acceptance of untruths as truth is harmful...The truth of a particular idea is often revealed in the way it leads people to behave...Time is a test of truth.”

([https://index.pcusa.org/nxt/gateway.dll/const_PCUSA/The%20Annotated%20Book%20of%20Order%20Edition%202019-2020/165/862/866?f=templates\\$fn=document-frameset.htm\\$q=\[field,%20folio-destination-name:%27Historic%20Principles,%201983,%20pp%20141ff%27\]\\$x=Server#0-0-0-3975](https://index.pcusa.org/nxt/gateway.dll/const_PCUSA/The%20Annotated%20Book%20of%20Order%20Edition%202019-2020/165/862/866?f=templates$fn=document-frameset.htm$q=[field,%20folio-destination-name:%27Historic%20Principles,%201983,%20pp%20141ff%27]$x=Server#0-0-0-3975))

Truth is in order to goodness, sometimes over a long stretch of time.

The New York Times columnist Tom Friedman spoke this past week at an event here in town sponsored by World Savvy, a wonderful national education non-profit headquartered in Minneapolis. Friedman commented on the credo of the founder of Facebook Mark Zuckerman: *move fast and break things*.

Friedman countered: “In a speeding world, that which happens slowly is more important than ever.”

The three things such a world needs, he said, are *self-motivation*, the discipline to engage even when so much

can be done for us, without our engagement; *access*, the capacity to get and use the technology; and, *character*.

Friedman focused on that last point, character. He named a number of “slow-moving” experiences that teach empathy and kindness and help create lasting, healthy community. At the top of his list was Sunday School – and he didn’t mean what happens only in churches; at this very moment, over at Temple Israel they are teaching in the synagogue what they call Sunday School.

People of faith instinctively know that slowing down helps us and our children see and listen and discern more carefully. Prayer slows us down. Music slows us down. Quiet slows us down. Every Wednesday evening people gather for mid-week worship in Westminster Hall that includes 5-6 minutes of silence together. It never seems long enough.

God rested on the seventh day in the Creation story and wonder at all that had been made. The Creator needed to stop and see the truth of all that beauty – and then *pronounce it good*. We are told to honor the Sabbath because human beings lose their way when they go fast all the time. *Truth gets in when we slow down – and truth is in order to goodness*.

We don’t often think of Jesus as having a focus on *truth* in his ministry. He healed, he taught, he loved those reviled

or feared by others, he welcomed those excluded, he prayed, he listened, he gave his life for others. But what does all that have to do with *truth*?

It has *everything* to do with truth.

Jesus said, "I am the way *the truth*, and the life." (John 14:6)

With his own life, Jesus points to the truth, truth with a capital T and the smaller, everyday truths at the core of our faith, that you and I try to live every day: that love is greater than fear and compassion stronger than hate, that dawn will follow even the longest night, that mercy leads to forgiveness and grace heals brokenness, that hope gives courage to seek justice against all odds. that we are not alone.

I John asks a simple question:

"How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. And by this we will know that we are from the truth." (I John 3:17-19a)

We who follow Jesus *are from the truth*. We *belong to the truth*. That means how we live is not some random

accident, controlled by some force outside of us, but a direct result of holding fast to the truth that God is love.

“We are persuaded,” the Presbyterians said long ago,

“That there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise, it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.” (PCUSA Book of Order, F-1.0304: Historic Principles)

Truth is in order to goodness.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.