

*Angels and Demons: The Search for Truth*

John 17: 14-19

Zachariah 8: 14-17

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## **I. Introduction**

Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, Jesus is dragged before Pilate to answer the accusations that the Jewish leaders had been making about him. Jesus tells Pilate, “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.” To which Pilate responds, “What is truth?”

Truth – and how we go about discerning truth – is a central theme throughout the Scriptures. The Greek word for “truth” – *aláthia* – (or one of its derivatives) is used over 100 times in the New Testament alone. We know a lot of these passages by heart: “and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth”; “you will know the truth and the truth will make you free”; “I am the way and the truth and the life.” At the heart of our journey of faith is a quest for truth.

The quest for truth, of course, is also at the heart of science. But what constitutes truth in religion and science have at times been at odds. Before Dan Brown wrote The DaVinci Code, he wrote a book called Angels and Demons that’s centered on the historic battle between religion and science. Since the movie of Angels and Demons is coming out in a couple of weeks, with Tom Hanks again playing the role of Robert Langdon, this seemed like a good time to look at the – sometimes tortured – relationship between faith and science.

Last week we spent some time looking at how the church’s misreading of the Scriptures has been at the heart of some of the conflict between the two disciplines. But today and for the next couple of weeks, rather than look at the differences, we’re going to look at the similar values that bind faith and science together and keep them in dialogue. The first of those values is the passion for truth.

## **II. What is Truth?**

So let’s begin our exploration by answering Pilate’s question: What is truth? On its most basic level, truth is a correspondence between how we affirm the world to be and how it actually is. If I say that the water in the tea kettle is boiling, and we look and the water is boiling, then my statement is true; if it isn’t boiling, the statement is false. That’s fairly simple and straightforward.

But if we dig a layer deeper, it begins to get more complicated (this example, by the way, comes from John Polkinghorne, who is a professor of elementary particle physics and an Anglican priest). If I ask “why is the kettle boiling?” from one standpoint, the answer is because

the heat from my gas burner is adding energy to the water molecules causing them to increase in speed, to expand, and to transform from liquid into gas.

But if I ask “why is the kettle boiling?” from a different standpoint, the answer might be “because I want a cup of tea.” The example is over-simplified, but basically, the first question – the science question – asks “how?” while the faith question asks “why?” The one is a mechanical question; the other, a meaning question.

Now you’d never say that one of those answers is true and the other false. They’re both true answers, but to different questions. And we need both answers. Science and religion are both looking for truth, and both are looking for truth that lies below the surface of the reality that we observe. But they’re asking different questions about it.

Science is about exploring the patterns of the physical world – developing theories about gravity or quantum mechanics, or evolution; theories that are not self-evident, but are none-the-less true. Religion is about opening ourselves to, and seeking to understand, the Creator of the physical world; it’s about discovering meaning and purpose – again, understandings that are not necessarily self-evident, but are none-the-less true.

Both science and religion assert that truth is rarely simple, and both disciplines are about looking behind that curtain of the way things seem at why things are the way they are, and they have different criteria for how to determine truth.

For a scientist, the criteria for truth are measurability, replicability, and controlled experimental evidence. And all of these are linked to the ability to make an accurate prediction. An observation is true if we can find the right measuring stick and if several people can repeat the observation. For a theologian, the criteria for truth are Scripture and tradition and reason and experience. When those four come together, we understand something as true. So, as we discussed last week, Scripture is the primary touchstone of what constitutes religious truth – truth about God.

And, interestingly, you’ll note that in many ways those criteria are opposites. Nothing is true, from the point of view of science, unless it is repeatable: a phenomenon has to happen the same way consistently for it to be true. In religion, on the other hand, most of our truth is revealed through absolutely unique events and people. There’s only one Exodus that shapes the children of Israel. There’s only one Jesus Christ who reveals the Father to us.

So the two disciplines are asking different questions, and they have very different criteria for measuring truth. But both questions and criteria are valid, and we need to have both. And they shouldn’t bring the disciplines into conflict, unless they start drifting over into each other’s territory.

### **III. Worlds Colliding**

When either discipline asks questions that it's not equipped to answer, that's when we start getting into conflict; and this happens on both sides. For much of the history of the conflict between science and religion, it was religion that was asking the wrong questions and looking to the wrong criteria.

When the inquisition was persecuting Galileo about his observations that the earth orbited the sun, the church was asking the wrong questions ("how" questions) and using the wrong criteria (it conflicts with Scripture). Well, as we discussed last week, when we ask the right questions of Scripture ("what does this tell us about God and our relationship with God"), then we avoid this problem.

But, scientists err on this as well. There have been a host of books that have come out over the past few years espousing a very militant atheism. Richard Dawkins wrote a book in 2006 called The God Delusion arguing that faith was a form of impaired thinking; and in 2007 Christopher Hitchens published his screed, God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything. Both books, and many others like them, argue that science has done away with God or at least the need for God.

But the questions that those books raise, are questions of ultimate purpose and meaning that science is not equipped to answer. You can't *prove* that there's no God, any more that you can *prove* that there is a God. The whole question of God lies outside of the closed system in which science operates. Or to say, for example, that "All religious experience can be explained by the operation of our neurotransmitters" *sounds* scientific, but it's not. You can't produce measurable, replicable data to support that.

#### **IV. A Passion for Truth**

So while there are meaningful differences in the way that faith and science search for truth, those ways are complementary, and we need both. We need both particularly in our modern world, which ironically holds up the precision of scientific truth as its model at the same time that it struggles so profoundly with telling the truth.

We live in a world where we are often not encouraged to either acknowledge the truth around us or speak the truth to those around us. Our political leaders often lie to us, or "spin" the truth in ways that are advantageous to themselves. Companies try to sell us their products by implying benefits that are impossible to promise. And in our individual lives and as a church, it is often easier to avoid conflict than to speak a true word.

And yet in many ways, our truth avoidance is killing us as individuals and as a community. Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote a book called A Passion for Truth in which he says:

"For most of us, life is a series of evasions, pretensions, substitutions, and rationalizations. We do not see the world as it is, but as a projection of ourselves, and so we are prisoners of delusions that hold us in their spell even after we become aware of

their deceptiveness. Gradually pretensions are converted into certainties, rationalizations become entangled, and madness sets in.”

And while “madness” may seem like a dramatic word, it brings to my mind a wonderful book called The Road Less Traveled written by a psychiatrist named M. Scott Peck. From the point of view of a clinical psychiatrist, Peck argued in that book that emotional health is in large part the result of a commitment to truth, and that much emotional illness stems from an unwillingness to accept the truth of the world as it is. Like Heschel, Peck believed that our patterns of avoiding uncomfortable truth – truths about economic injustice in the world, truths about brokenness in our relationships – quickly harden to become patterns that are destructive to ourselves and the people around us.

[In the eighth chapter of John, Jesus tells the people around him that “When [the devil] lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. In this verse, Jesus makes clear that our falling into patterns of untruth is not generally a matter of lack of knowledge, but a lack of will; we let ourselves avoid truths that are uncomfortable.]

Science and faith together call us to make a commitment to truth: that, while sometimes painful, it is healthier and more life-giving to be able to speak a word of truth than to avoid it. We don’t always live up to this high calling. Sometime both the religious and scientific communities can be subverted by a political or economic agenda. But the call is still there.

## **V. Conclusion**

In 1633, Galileo was forced by the Inquisition to recant his belief that the earth moved around the sun. After he signed his name to the document and was led from the chamber to the house arrest that would last the rest of his life, he is reputed to have muttered under his breath, “And yet, it does move.” It’s that kind of stubborn, dogged faithfulness to the truth that is the hallmark of what is best in both science and religion.

So we have an opportunity this morning, as we explore the relationship between science and religion, to not make this simply an academic exercise, but to recommit ourselves to “a passion for truth.” It’s a call that can be hard, and can be painful. But from the point of view of both faith and science, nothing is more important.

Amen.