

Oxymoronic Reality

Matthew 11:7-19

I want to begin with a basic, fundamental question: What is reality? What is real for you and what is not? How do you know something is true and accurate or how do you determine what is genuine and authoritative, distinguishing it from that which is not?

Up until recently, I thought I had a pretty good handle on reality, i.e., what were presented and proven as facts were facts and what had no evidence to back it was either a stretching of the truth or an outright falsehood, i.e., an intentional lie. The distinction between falsehoods and facts used to be clearer in our culture than they have come to be more recently.

As we all know, the lines between fact and fiction have become blurred and new terms have been introduced to our cultural vocabulary: “fake news” and “alternative facts”. *Fake news* refers to a headline or news story characterized as bogus if it is not acceptable or believed—with or without evidence to back it up. *Alternative facts* is similar, usually referring to an interpretation of evidence that flies in the face of the more widely accepted or conventional view.

We all know why these new terms became a part of our national discourse. Yet, they continue to thrive in the partisan environment of politics and the growing distrust among our citizenry over standard sources of information. From the grassroots of America to the highest offices in our land, the public is not only questioning the accuracy of information, but also the legitimacy and reliability of the sources and the motivation or intent behind reporting the news. On an institutional level, polls indicate Americans question the integrity of our most steadfast institutions,

including the fairness of elections, as well as our legislative and judicial processes; but it carries over into areas of scientific consensus, the purpose and value of public education, and even the constitutional protection of a free press.

Regarding the press, this is where ideology seems to matter more than truth. Depending on your particular political leanings, you can get news and information from sources that cater to the emphases and slant you like, where you parade the “facts” that fit into your view of the world while dismissing anything that might challenge it—the veritable “echo chamber”. This has a strange effect: “truth” is no longer viewed as reliable or objective; it has become anything people want it to be. Pick your bias and find the news source to validate it!

As you might guess, this doesn’t square with reality. Facts are not fiction simply because someone doesn’t want to believe them. Journalism isn’t “fake news” merely because they report what the party in (or out of) power doesn’t want to hear. Objectivity and neutrality, however, have become difficult paths to navigate, insofar as partisan views are so forceful and hardened against each other that virtually every report, every headline, every news story is construed as some form of political spin (liberal/conservative) or portrayed as an unfair attack, instead of being above the fray to convey accurate information and unbiased truth. With this sudden free fall of respect for truth and accuracy, normally reliable sources are fighting a battle against being branded as illegitimate to the point that any accountability or critique of political leadership or public policy by the press is painted as a conspiracy against the common good. So this is why we ask, what is true? What is reality in America today? Who knows? “Accurate reporting” is even construed as an oxymoron!

An oxymoron, for those unfamiliar with the term, is a figure of speech appearing contradictory because of conflicting images juxtaposed to each other. It's not as complicated as it sounds, as we employ oxymoronic language in our daily conversations and communication, often without realizing it. Here are a few common ones: open secret; pretty ugly; act naturally; found missing; deafening silence; larger half; alone together; civil war; seriously funny, clearly confused; minor crisis; exact estimate; random order; paid volunteer; wireless cable; freezer burn; crash landing; liquid gas; friendly takeover; jumbo shrimp; loyal opposition; constant variable. I'm drawn to the snarky ones, e.g., "Microsoft Works" or "Peacemaker Missile" or "Congressional Ethics" or "dry Baptist"!

Even if we find them semantically entertaining, it's not so easy when reality itself is oxymoronic. Everything seems conflicted—very confusing, as no one knows what to believe. Cynicism abounds; truth is conditioned by the bias you hold; objectivity is nonexistent or, at best, subject to opinion; absolutes are only what you believe to be true. When this becomes everyday life, then common decency and common good don't exist, because there is little that is viewed as common between partisans. In this great divide, everyone who is not your friend is your rival or enemy, reflecting these binary conflicts. Even "common good" becomes an oxymoron, instead of a standard that reflects and serves everyone's mutual welfare!

This notion of an oxymoronic reality is interesting as it relates to our lectionary text for today, which almost reads as if it were written for our current times:

But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,
"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
We wailed, and you did not mourn."

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

Clearly, there is a story behind these verses, simply because of the existing tension in the charges brought against Jesus and John the Baptist (John is demon possessed; Jesus is a glutton and a drunk). If that’s the buzz about them, then clearly, someone has it in for them! The “fake news” is obvious if anyone listened to them in person—clearly, an underlying prejudice against the messages of both John and Jesus was spun in the public square to undermine any appeal and receptivity to their proclamation. Where might that have come from? Who had it in for John and Jesus?

It came from those who felt directly threatened by these prophetic campaigns. Who would that be? All those at the top who had the most to lose—the political realm, religious officials and leaders, the wealthy elite, the ones who ran the world and kept its order to best serve their own interests. It was their political action committees doing the dirty work, painting the smear. Much of what John and Jesus proclaimed had the effect of unmasking their jaded reality—that the government was oppressive and corrupt, the religious leaders were beholden to power and spiritually bankrupt—while the ones most hurt by the politics and practices of Jerusalem and Rome were the poor, the widows, the orphans, the physically and mentally challenged, the prostitutes, the foreigners, the indentured servants, the day laborers on a minimal wage, the peasant farmers underwater in debt, the criminally charged and those condemned to prison, and anyone else the elite of the political, religious, economic, and social realms kept down in a dishonorable, degraded place.

Those at the top, however, blunted any serious public criticism directed at them by spinning disparaging lies about John, Jesus, and anyone else like them, so that they'd be the ones discredited in the public's eye. This is the way political power operates: make up stuff if you have to so everyone would stop listening to critics, let alone believing them. Plant some "fake news" about John as a crazy man to be avoided at all cost; spread the scandal that Jesus was a rebellious son, not the spiritual sage or messianic savior you believe him to be. Bring in your own likeminded religious leaders who will open the holy Scriptures which explain what God wants done with people like this, as we so reverently read from

Deuteronomy 21:

If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard" [notice, the same charge brought against Jesus!]. Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid. [vv. 18-21]

Wow! What a penalty to pay for adolescent rebellion (half of Noank would be stoned)! Purge the evil from your midst—let the public bring down these political agitators. Yes, that's what this Nazorean was—a glutton and a drunkard, a ne'er-do-well wasting away the precious resources of his own family. Why would anyone listen to such a disgraceful man? Stoning him might go too far, but tarnishing his reputation with a little scandalous gossip was warranted and soon enough, neither John nor Jesus would have a following.

Except, Jesus and John were truth-tellers, and people are drawn to the truth. The evidence of what they claimed was on their side. Truth-tellers don't rise up and stand on their own. They need no lies to attack the other

side—no political spin or foreign conspiracy to take their opponents down. They only had to proclaim the truth. The truth was self-evident in their own society—it was plainly accounted for by their deeds. Always find your evidence directly from the source before you draw any conclusions as to what is truthful and genuine. Don't believe the second-hand political spin. Most of it is fake news!

Both Jesus and John were not only good, the evidence of their unselfish lives was apparent in tangible deeds of justice and mercy—in helping those the politicians simply despised, in serving the ones the public feared, in healing those the priests would not touch, and by saving the lives of those who were deemed “social problems”. The bottom line is, wisdom—that which is true and authentic—is vindicated by her deeds. “By their fruit you shall know them.” Know the truth and the truth will set you free! John already had tried to warn the elite of their coming day of reckoning. *Repent, you brood of vipers!...Bear fruit worthy of repentance*—“do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8)! And the accuracy of this prophetic witness came before another generation would pass, as the entire system holding up their nation's capital *collapsed* to its utter ruin. Even the temple was destroyed.

As we know, Jesus wasn't particularly easy on the rich and powerful, either. His teachings, bent toward transforming his world before they lost it all, were delivered through parables and, oddly enough, with oxymorons.

Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth...

Deniers say, “Really?”

The last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Skeptics jeer, “When will that ever happen?”

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

Cynics cry, “That’s absurd!”

Love your enemies; do good to those who harm you.

Pragmatists chide, “Why on earth would anyone do that?”

Those who would save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will find it.

Critics sneer, “What does that even mean and how does that ever happen?”

Do unto others what you would want done to you.

Realists scoff, “Don’t you mean, do it to others before they do it to you?”

So, who is speaking the truth and who is spinning a lie?

A friend of mine, John Burns, wrote in the recent *The Christian Citizen* magazine,

Truth is the accurate presentation of the way things are without the intention to deceive, confuse, cover or mislead. Anticipated reactions can’t alter the message of the truthful...By the same token, to inflate facts to stir up trouble or make up information out of whole cloth to manipulate people’s fears is the work of the deceiver.¹

In the same issue, Amy Butler, the Senior Minister at the Riverside Church in Manhattan adds her insights about facts and truth.

As Christians, how do we respond when facts are in dispute? Is it the role of the Church to join the fray, shouting louder and louder and hoping a certain version of the facts gets heard?

I think not. Instead, in this era of disputed facts, the Christian voice has a different role to play in the national discourse. Rather than curating facts, people of faith are called to proclaim truth...

Consider the difference:

It is a fact that, in more than 30 years, not one refugee who came to the United States has committed a terrorist attack against us, and no one from the seven countries named in Trump’s recent Muslim ban attacked the United States on Sept. 11, 2001. Instead of reciting this fact, people of faith are called to tell the truth. *We welcome the immigrant and the stranger.*

It is a fact that our world is getting warmer, our climate is changing, and the effects of that change are hurting some of the most vulnerable people on the

¹ John Burns, “What is Truth?” *The Christian Citizen*, American Baptist Home Missions Societies, Vol. 1, 2017, pp. 8,9.

planet. Instead of reciting this fact, people of faith are called to tell the truth: *We care for creation and the marginalized.*

It is a fact that more guns in society make all of us less safe. Instead of reciting this fact, people of faith are called to tell the truth: *Human life is valuable, and losing 30,000 lives a year to gun violence is unacceptable.*

It is a fact that the American economy is stronger than it was eight years ago. Instead of reciting this fact, people of faith are called to tell the truth: *Too many still struggle to put food on the table, and no child in America should ever go hungry.*

See the difference? Facts define and distinguish one position from another. Truth draws us into relationship based on our shared humanity. ²

Amy is right—speaking truth to power, being a truth-teller is our calling in a time of fake news and disputed facts. Let us speak into this confusion with core values which are jeopardized by the current trends in our society and world.

This is our reality—the hope we have in the values and teachings of the one who represents divine life and presence. We follow Jesus—we embrace his values! This is our truth—to speak to the value of every human life, to support the least of these in their vulnerable states and living standards, and to overcome the inherent selfish bias that exists so often in public policies and privileged lifestyles. The truth we speak is eternal and applies universally the world over—to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly on this earth.

How do we know this is true? It's because of the evidence of the goodness that emerges when people care for others, when generosity provides abundantly, when mercy is extended bringing hope to the despairing, when reconciliation and respect allow people to thrive in their diversity and differences, and when we realize the world is a better place when *all* people (and not just *some* people!) are allowed to live well. That's the common good; that's what brings about a commonwealth. Those are

² Amy Butler, "Truth: The soul work our country needs", *The Christian Citizen*, Vol. 1, 2017, pp. 4,5.

the hallmarks of the beloved community of Christ—a harmonious reality which ushers in the peaceable realm of God, where swords are indeed turned into plowshares and the lions of this world share the land with the lambs.

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