

"Ego, Awe, and a Humble Heart"
A talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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INTRO

Our theme for December is "Mystery: The practice of embracing life with humility and awe."

That's a bit much to be biting off at one time. So today I will be thinking about mystery and humility. Next Sunday I'll be asking "Why is Awe So Awesome?" and on the 16th, "That's My Mystery and I'm Sticking With It." Rev. Jim will be speaking on December 23 and I'll be back on the 30th with a recipe for Humble Pie.

But today, mystery and humility.

If there's one foundational thought in the Western world, it is that that "truth is out there." Truth is out there, and it's important. Take as example these words attributed to Jesus: "And you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32 KJV).

Sounds good. Finding truth is a way to solve a mystery. Right?

Mystery is easy to define: it's stuff we don't understand. But truth isn't stuff we do understand, is it? So, my question is: what is it we're talking about when we talk about "truth"?

Maybe knowing how difficult "truth" is will be one way to stay humble . . .

First, we must remind ourselves when we hear a statement such as "the truth shall set you free" that "the truth" didn't mean what it means today. (This difficulty is another thing that should keep us humble.)

The Greek word for "truth" in this instance—because the Christian scriptures were written in Greek—is *alitheia*, which means something like "will be disclosed." So that

passage in the Gospel of John says something more along the lines of “you shall know the undisclosed and the (discloser of the) undisclosed shall set you free.”

Or perhaps “you shall know the evident and the evident shall set you free.”

A-litheia. “A” has the meaning of “not” and lethe means something like “oblivion.” Lethe was the Greek spirit of forgetfulness and is one of the rivers in the underworld. The dead cross the River Lethe and forget the world of the living.

So perhaps John 8:32 says something more like, “And you shall know what you have forgotten and the forgotten shall set you free.”

Or “you shall know oblivion and (knowledge of) oblivion will set you free.”

You see the problem with translation. It’s all it the spin. (And parenthetically remember that uneducated Palestinians of the time that Jesus may have lived did not speak Greek. So every word reported in Greek to have been spoken by Jesus is actually already an interpretation.)

But back to the Greek. A-litheia. Is UN-forgetting or disclosing the same thing as “truth” as we commonly consider it?

The word “truth” is an Old English word. It necessarily doesn’t occur in any Hebrew or Christian scriptures as originally written. The English word “truth” is ultimately tied back to the Proto-Indo-European word *drū-, which meant “tree” and is the source of the word “druid.”

The Old English word triewð more closely means “loyalty.” Troth, as the old fashioned marriage vows put it, “to you I pledge my troth.” That’s what it meant to be “betrothed.”

We hear “forsooth” used ironically these days. But “sooth” is the Old English word that more closely translates to the word fact, which, by the way is Latin. Trivia: Before the Latin word “amen” became the standard in Christian liturgy, Old English Christians ended prayers with the word soothliche, meaning “let it be a fact.”

So, you see, it’s great to have a commitment to truth, but what is this commitment actually to? I’ve shared before Friedrich Nietzsche’s view that truth is a

mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are . . . (The Portable Nietzsche 46-47)

I'll get back to that, but first let's consider some advice about being humble.

ONE

Tiglath-Pileser III isn't exactly a household name anymore. He lived and died 2800 years ago. But in his lifetime he was a big deal. He was the ruler of the Assyrian Empire, which encompassed parts of what are nowadays Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Palestine.

Tiglath-Pileser III would be even less well known if he hadn't caused a refugee crisis that made it into the Hebrew bible.

At that time the Hebrew tribes had split into two different and often warring nations, Israel in the north and Judea in the south. "Judea" is where the term "Jew" comes from. The capital of Judea was Jerusalem.

Tiglath-Pileser III's invasion of Israel led to that major refugee crisis. The situation became so bad that it drove a fellow by the name of Micah to become a prophet. (BTW: Micah is the one who prophesied that the future messiah would be born in Bethlehem.)

Micah saw the refugees streaming in, and he heard the political leaders and the religious leaders saying (the seventh century BCE equivalent of) "build a wall! build a wall! Call in the troops!" The religious authorities were definitely on the Fox News side of the equation, and so Micah felt compelled to get out into the street and preach against this moral outrage that he saw as expressly violating God's will, which he considered to be on the side of compassion. Micah set out to clarify the moral agenda.

Micah is most famous for chapter 6 verse 8 in his book, which reads,

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

(Note that “walk” is ableist language.)

One of our summer ministers in the past was Rev. Bill Holden, whose memorial service we hosted a few years back. Bill was a Humanist who amended the Micah verse to read, “What does your humanity require of you but to do justly, love compassion, and live humbly with your ideas.”

I don’t know of any better reminder of the humility part of that theme than those words written by Micah and Rev. Bill: “. . . do justly, love compassion, and live humbly with your ideas.”

TWO

Yet, I hear someone thinking: Yes, well and good, but I’m committed to the Truth! Which, you know, is the opposite of mystery and nothing to be humble about!

But see, the more I think about it, the more convincing Nietzsche’s view of truth becomes. Truth is a

mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. (The Portable Nietzsche 46-47)

Is Nietzsche correct? Are truths only “illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are”?

Postmodern philosophers have agreed with Nietzsche. Sure, there are facts, but truths are interpretations.

Take for example a current American favorite, firearms.

It’s a fact that firearms exist.

It’s a fact that firearms are readily available both legally and illegally.

It’s a fact that firearms are used in the majority of murders in the United States.

Then there are the “truths” about firearms that both sides of the issue see as “self-evident:” firearms are a guaranteed right of US citizens Or not.

Firearms are essential for self protection Or not.

Some types of firearms should be legal to buy and own, others should not. Or not.

These “truths” are “self-evident” only as interpretations of facts.

Flying bullets are facts. Bodies mutilated by flying bullets are facts. How and why those bullets are flying is interpretation, which is, as Nietzsche put it, “a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically.”

It’s traditional to distinguish between truth and meaning. But a third element is often jumbled in. Actually, there are facts, there are truths, and there is meaning. (The change of verb there between plural and singular is important.) Facts are measurable and quantifiable by anyone anywhere anytime; truths are interpretations that enter into a shared social imaginary—in other words lots of people agree on truths; and then there is meaning, which is entirely subjective and personal.

We can agree on facts. We can agree on truths—or perhaps we should say “objectivity” —truths are created by intersubjective consensus, though we have to be sure that what we’re talking about is actual consensus, not merely asking other people who look like us or agree with us without thinking about it.

And we never can actually know if our meanings have anything to do with one another. Meaning—like your favorite ice cream flavor—is personal. Subjective.

Keeping these things in mind can help us walk more humbly with our ideas.

THREE

Well yes, I hear someone thinking, but science is about facts, and that opposed to religion, which is about what appears to be mysterious at the moment.

Excuse me if I go on a bit further:

The word science came into English from Latin via Old French. Scientia in Latin meant "knowledge." The verb scire means "to know."

"Science" means "to know." Know as a word derives from Old English, cnāwan.

What I'm getting at here is that language in general is always problematic.

"You shall scire (know) loyalty and loyalty shall set you free" is rather a different sort of claim that "you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."

But I've been going on about the Greek word for truth when actually, the English translation of that verse into the bible comes directly out of the Latin Vulgate translation of Christian scriptures. The Latin reads "et cognoscenti veritatem et veritas liberabit vos. That's easy to translate: "and those who know (the cognoscent) shall know the truth (veritas) and the truth shall liberabit—liberate—them."

The great fountainhead of Puritan thinking, John Calvin, deeply believed that revelation is ongoing and that the more human beings learn about reality, the more that god—which Calvin considered the ultimate truth—will be revealed.

That's why the great university of Puritan design, Harvard, has as its motto, veritas. "Truth."

And, by the way, perhaps John Calvin is still on the right track: perhaps the more we know, the more that "god" is revealed. It's just that "god" isn't what Calvin—and the Christian tradition—thought "god" is.

Who is to say? It's a . . . mystery!

What Calvin and his Puritan disciples didn't get was that the "god" that further human knowledge would reveal would not be the Puritan god.

It's still debatable whether or not "god" is being revealed by expanding human knowledge. Some naturalists argue that, yes, this—everything that is—is god. Others argue that we've stretched that term way beyond its limits and we need to stop calling it that.

We need to be walking humbly with our ideas around all that.

A few weeks ago I mentioned the Pope's favorite atheist, the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, who said, "thank God I'm an atheist."

Professor Vattimo argues in his book *The Future of Religion* that "postmodern nihilism constitutes the actual truth of Christianity."

What does that mean? Vattimo argues that it's difficult to say that Christian culture has not had free rein (and reign) over the Western world—once called Christendom—for a couple of millennia. The long culture war between Christianity and science has been about domination—control of the apparatus of meaning. But science, says Vattimo, as did John Calvin, is the revelation of "truth." And Vattimo concludes that the ultimate epiphany of Christianity is . . . wait for it! . . . atheism.

Sounds odd. But consider this dangerous idea: the Christian revelation is that "god" became human. That's what that big Christmas celebration we're hearing about meant.

Now, take the miraculous out of that—things like a virgin birth and rising from the dead, and you have . . . god becoming human. Which is, ummmm . . . Humanism.

CONCLUSION

BTW, if you can at all, be sure to attend our noon program "Atheism, Humanism, Naturalism: A Non-theistic Continuum" with Dr. William Hart. Bill Hart is at the academic cutting edge of what I've been talking about today.

I'll leave you with the quote that's in your order of service this morning. It's from the British philosopher John Gray in his new book *Seven Types of Atheism*. Gray (who is an atheist, btw) says,

Religion is no more a primitive type of science than is art or poetry. Scientific inquiry answers a demand for explanation. The practice of religion expresses a need for meaning, which would remain unsatisfied even if everything could be explained.

Think about it. Science is about facts, not about what we should be doing with all those facts.

What ought we do in the face of all those Tiglath-Pileser IIIs that keep popping up all over the world?

The prophet Micah didn't need the theory of relativity to figure it all out: "What does your humanity require of you but to do justly, love compassion, and live humbly with your ideas."

SOURCES

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