

“Certainty and Truth” by David Lloyd

August 23, 2015



Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

When Kevin preached two weeks ago I was struck by his voicing the forlorn hope that our Celebration Circle mission group would explain its choice of our liturgical theme “Missing the Point.” I don’t expect Celebration Circle to explain its theme, but the theme, the reflection statement that “Certainty is missing the point entirely,” and the confusing signpost that is both at the altar and on the cover of our worship folder have all been challenging me these weeks.

Many of our fellow Christians believe in the literal truth of the Bible, not only that it is God’s word but also that it is inerrant in every detail. They are looking for a faith based on certainty. Maybe some of you share that quest. Now there is nothing wrong with searching for certainty. We tend to look for certainty all the time in our daily lives and it is human nature to extend our search for certainty into our faith. But to seek certainty in every word of the Bible, meaning that all of its details are verifiable, is problematic and if that is what Celebration Circle is saying by stating “certainty is missing the point entirely” they are correct.

A good chunk of scripture, perhaps most of it, is presented as historical narrative, which to our post-Enlightenment minds means that the details of its narrative should be verifiable. Some details in scripture are clearly verifiable. There is a city called Jerusalem and the towns of Bethlehem and

Nazareth. But some parts of scripture presented as historical narrative are not verifiable. The books of Kings and Chronicles have details about both Hebrew and Gentile leaders and wars that conflict with details unearthed in archeology. Details in the book of Daniel aren't verifiable because they are mystical or metaphorical; Ezekiel and Isaiah contain unverifiable ecstatic prophecy.

The New Testament Epistles aren't verifiable because letters can contain inaccuracies or be sent with parts missing, or have parts deleted either intentionally or accidentally such as the letters from Paul to the church in Corinth. (I've accidentally hit the "send" button and sent an e-mail before it was completed or spell-checked and have received a letter or an e-mail and had to supply missing words to make sense of it, or wondered whether a page is missing.) Still other parts of scripture are not verifiable simply because they aren't presented as historical narrative, such as Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.

We don't have the original New Testament, as Professor [Bart Ehrman](#) has pointed out in his book, [Misquoting Jesus](#). We only have translations that are based on centuries of copying a selection of Latin and Greek texts made in the 3rd century by believers from a range of copies of texts that themselves were a combination of the oral and written traditions of 1st and 2nd century believers who spoke Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek. We know that in the first few centuries of the Church different Christian congregations throughout the Mediterranean and Near East used scriptures that frequently varied in details and frequently included and excluded texts of other congregations. We all know that errors creep in when copies are made by hand and many of these copies of scripture made over the centuries in Greek or Latin show "editors' corrections" in the margins. Ehrman points out that we don't know whether some of the purported corrections are more accurate than the text they are correcting.

The Revised Common Lectionary passages this season certainly raise questions about verifiability in our post-Enlightenment minds. We heard about miracles of healing, feeding the multitude, and walking on water and we wondered if these were possible, and if so, how. In his letter to the Church in Ephesus Paul claimed that Christ's death broke down the barrier between Jews and

Gentiles, annulled the Torah, and created a new humanity. We wondered, did Jesus' death really do that? We have had two millennia of conflict between Jews and Christians including the Holocaust, and more recently the conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinians and between Israel and nearby Muslim countries.

In John's gospel Jesus boldly asserted that the work for us that creates eternal life is to believe in him, that he himself was the bread of life, that whoever comes to him will never be hungry, that whoever believes in him will never be thirsty, and he will raise them up on the last day. But although we claim to believe aren't we still hungry, aren't we still thirsty, for eternal life? Last week in John's gospel Jesus stated that for believers to possess eternal life they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. We do that every month. Do we believe we are possessing eternal life? This week, as we just heard, John's gospel repeats this and tells scoffers that no one can come to Jesus unless it is God's will. Not surprisingly, many of Jesus' disciples quit following him at that point. Maybe some of us will too, or have already. Jesus' words in John's gospel don't instill much certainty in me.

But I am troubled by several things about the liturgical theme we have.

The first thing is the word "entirely" in the reflection. We may lack certainty of details but we may have certainty, a knowing in the deepest part of ourselves, regarding the central message of Christianity. Or even if the central message lacks certainty for some of us, there may be enough truth to the central message for us to live by it.

Let me give you an example. Now that I'm retired from full-time work I'm a D.C. tour guide. Almost every tour group I guide in Washington DC goes to the Lincoln Memorial. Before we go up the steps I tell the group what to look for in the Memorial and invite each group to say the first sentence of the Gettysburg Address with me. You know the words: "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Now the proposition that all men are created equal had been declared by Thomas Jefferson and the others on the committee who wrote the Declaration of Independence to be a "truth" that is "self-evident." But it isn't a self-

evident truth at all. Babies come into this world unequal because of cultural and religious prejudices about sex and gender and race and ethnicity and nationality and income. And beyond that, some babies come into the world with genetic abnormalities so severe that they are dying already and other babies come with spina bifida or congenital heart defects or developmental disabilities or suffering from their mother's drug or alcohol addiction. And even if at a higher more abstract level equality is a self-evident truth, the language of the Declaration of Independence doesn't specifically list it among the several rights upon which the founding fathers believed that government is instituted to secure. So Lincoln was either mistaken or was being disingenuous when he claimed that equality was the proposition, it is correct to say it is one of several propositions, upon which our nation was dedicated. But I don't tell the groups all that because by 1863, when Lincoln dedicated that cemetery up in Gettysburg, he had issued the Emancipation Proclamation to declare slavery in the Confederacy abolished, and slavery had been ended in the District of Columbia by paying slave owners here an amount for the value of the loss of their slaves. Two years later before Lincoln died Congress enacted the Thirteenth Amendment to abolish slavery everywhere in the U.S. So within Lincoln's lifetime the nation was striving to make this statement a reality, there was a kind of truthfulness to his assertion in the Gettysburg Address. We haven't yet made this conviction totally a reality – we are still working on it 150 years later as our own efforts at race and reconciliation and feminism and rights for LGBT people bear witness. And yet, by and large there really is something in the American culture that believes at some level that everyone is equal or should be equal at least in some things – in politics, perhaps in their religious beliefs. There is a truthfulness in it even if it lacks certainty.

I believe there is truth to Christianity. I don't have certainty with respect to all the details; I live with some doubt just as I live with a truthfulness to the claim that all people are created equal but have doubt about the certainty of the details for everyone. The great theologian Paul Tillich, whom Anne Lamott has referred to, wrote that "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." And this brings me to where I part company a bit with Anne Lamott. The reflection in our worship folder lifted from her book, [Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith](#). It sits in a larger context:

I have a lot of faith. But I am also afraid a lot, and have no real certainty about anything. I remembered something Father Tom had told me—that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.

I agree with her that “faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.” I think that is what Mother Teresa experienced when she felt the absence of God for so long.

But Mother Teresa continued praying because she had faith; she believed that there is a truthfulness of Christianity, perhaps believed it to the point of certainty. I live with doubt but deep in me, I know that for me Christianity has truth. The history of Christianity is that not just hundreds of thousands, but hundreds of millions, have had faith despite some doubts, have believed the truthfulness of Christianity. And what is that truthfulness?

For me, it is that there is something I call “God” that somehow, without any rationality or any reason to, loves me totally, unconditionally, despite my inability to return that love or to love any person or thing as totally, or unconditionally, or irrationally. As Will Campbell used to say, the central message is that we are all bastards and God loves us anyway. It is that this love of God reached out to me through the life and teaching and death and resurrection of a man called Yeshua, Jesus. Jesus’ teachings and example of how to live, impossible as they are for me to follow fully, somehow are the right way, the only way, for me to live. Somehow, Jesus’ dying on the cross really did atone for my sins – my past sins, my present sins, and my future sins. Somehow, that Jesus came back to life in some way, shape, or form that I cannot begin to fully understand over the 2,000 years from the account of the New Testament we have, but that I can see the truth in. I see the truthfulness of the resurrection in people here and elsewhere who have had conversion experiences, who have met the risen Christ. I see the truthfulness of the resurrection in this motley body of Christ that meets here every Sunday and tries to love each other and love and minister to the world. I see the truthfulness of the resurrection as this same motley body of Christ frequently doesn’t see or doesn’t value or otherwise botches the

gifts we each have and so we frequently botch our attempts to love each other and our attempts to love and minister to the world. And I see that we believe in the truthfulness of the resurrection to ask over and over for God's forgiveness for botching up things and receiving that forgiveness and I see the truthfulness of the resurrection in our courage in trying yet again to love each other and to love and minister to the world.

I know the truthfulness of Job. When he was beset by all his troubles, when he had lost all of his property, all of his wealth, all of his children, and had sores all over his body, there was no reason for Job to believe in God's justice. And yet Job could still say, "I know that my Redeemer (or Vindicator) lives, and I will see God." Somehow, some way, I share Job's faith.

As I have looked at the signpost we have hanging here and on the front of our worship folder, I realized that it is free-floating. It depicts the same words pointing in different directions – there is no central point of relevance. The version in our worship folder is not resting upon the earth, like a real signpost. The hanging version does not rest on the altar where we put bread and the cup. None of the words upon it point to the cross. It is a signpost for those who have no certainty, who are not grounded by faith, who have no faith, who are not linked to the truthfulness of the Christian witness. It is a signpost for those who have no point of reference and are therefore doomed to miss the point. For me, as it is it is useless. I have looked at it for several weeks now and cannot let it be.

(Ties the signpost to the cross.)

Your life experience is different from mine. The details you have certainty about are different than mine. Where you will find God, truth, heaven, hope, and perfection will be different from where I find them. And yet, I believe we are pilgrims on the same path, knowing that God so loves the world that God came to us through Jesus, and that belief in Jesus brings us a new life that is eternal.