

# Deborah Sokolove: What is Truth?

A Sermon for Seekers Church

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by Deborah Sokolove

## What is Truth?

*It was Saturday morning, when pious Jewish men go to the synagogue to learn Torah together. Women, of course, mostly didn't go, because even though it was the Sabbath, they still had babies to nurse and other children to tend. And even if a woman did happen to stop in at the synagogue, she would not join the men in their studies, but would remain modestly listening from behind a screen, in the women's section of the room.*

*On this particular day, as Jesus was explaining his understanding of some difficult verse, a woman did come in. And not just any woman, but one with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over, completely unable to stand up straight. She didn't know Jesus, but she came hoping that the miracle-working teacher she had heard was in the neighborhood would be there this day. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "**Woman, you are released from your ailment.**" And when he touched her, she stood up straight and began praising God.*

*Meanwhile, the other men were practically apoplectic. It just wasn't done to invite a woman into their part of the meetinghouse. And to actually touch her – well, she was obviously ill, and since she was a woman they just had to assume that she was also ceremonially unfit to touch the holy books. Now that Jesus had touched her, he couldn't be allowed*

*to touch them, either, until he took a bath, which he couldn't do until the Sabbath was over.*

*But the worst thing was that it was the Sabbath, and everyone knew that it was not allowed to do any work on that day, and healing was considered work. The president of the fellowship was positively indignant to think that Jesus had healed someone, and kept saying to the crowd (and especially to the women who had come to hear what all the commotion was about), "There are six days for work; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day."*

*Jesus listened, and thought a bit, and remembered that there had been a ruling that humane acts towards farm animals were not to be regarded as prohibited work on the Sabbath. He said, "You hypocrites! Don't you untie your animals and give them food and water even on the Sabbath? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be released from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 13:10-16)*

Well, it's a good story. Jesus makes the other guys look like inconsiderate, unfeeling, misogynist boors. He lets them know that women are heirs to the covenant, too, and that to release a person from an evil spirit as quickly as possible was simply the human thing to do. They knew enough to feed and water the animals on the Sabbath, and surely a woman was more important than an ox or a donkey!

So, okay, we get the point. Or do we? For the last several hundred years, ever since the rational, scientific discourse of the Enlightenment became the dominant mode of Western thought, Christians have been on a search for the historical Jesus. This search, begun as a means to increase faith by grounding it in provable, historical reality, became in time a weapon against faith. As more and more became known about the circumstances surrounding the writing of the Gospels and other

New Testament texts, and as medicine came to be understood as a science rather than as a healing art, it became increasingly difficult for educated people to believe in the miraculous healings attributed to Jesus.

Today, many churches teach that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, and that if any part of it is untrue, then faith is in vain. And a lot of intelligent people, taking these preachers at their word, have decided that religion is nothing more than superstitious nonsense. If Jesus lived at all – and even that is subject to question – he was simply a particularly charismatic teacher, if not an out-and-out charlatan, and Paul was a spectacularly good press agent. True believers and unbelievers alike hinge their faith or lack of it on the simple question, "Is it true?" Did it really happen like that? Did God create the entire universe and all that is in it in six twenty-four-hour days, or is everything evolving slowly according to chance and Darwinian survival of the fittest? Was Jesus really the Word made Flesh, or just another false messiah whose legend outlived him?

The other day, Glen and I went to see a movie called "Smoke Signals." It's what is often called a "small film" – not a lot of special effects, no bad guys chasing good guys or the other way around, no monsters, no sex, no breathtaking costumes or set design. Just a lot of deadpan, ironic Native American jokes, a few spectacular views of the American West, and a clear-eyed look at human relationships. Unless you are a devotee of the now-defunct TV series "Northern Exposure," you wouldn't recognize any of the actors. Adapted from the novel *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, it is the story of how two young men from the Couer d'Alene reservation deal with the loss of their fathers.

One of the boys, Victor, is tall, handsome, and athletic. His alcoholic father left the reservation when the boy was twelve, and as the movie starts his mother has just received a phone call the father has died. The other, Thomas, is small,

bespectacled, and fancies himself a kind of shaman, constantly telling stories in a rather annoying singsong voice. His own parents died in a fire when he was an infant, and his grandmother has raised him.

Victor and Thomas travel to Phoenix to retrieve the ashes and possessions of Victor's father, and meet a young woman who had been his neighbor. Thomas tells her about his own memories of the dead man, while Victor sits silent and scowling, and then asks her what she remembers. She asks, "Do you want truth, or lies?" He answers, "Both." What he wants, and knows that Victor needs, is the rest of the story.

Here at Seekers, we know the value of story. We tell one another about our lives from the pulpit, in mission groups, in the School of Christian Living, and in informal conversations during coffee hour and over shared meals. One of the most profound experiences of coming into Core Membership is the reading aloud of one's spiritual autobiography, and being received with love and welcome, warts and doubts and tears and all. We tell our stories, and listen to those of others, in order to be known and to know, to love and be loved.

Sometimes, our stories change. Over time, we realize that there are multiple truths, that an event may be told one way today and another tomorrow and yet a third way next year. And though all seem to contradict one another, all may be true. Or none may be true. My memory of an event may not correspond with yours, but my telling of it is not therefore a lie. And what I remember today may not be what I find important in the story tomorrow, as the meaning shifts in the light of my present life, of our present life together. What is really important is not the facts, after all, but the meaning the story has for our common future.

But when it comes to the Bible, we often seem to forget all this. Recently, as David Lloyd was giving Jeanne Marcus and me a lift home from some Seekers event, we got to talking about

how little solid, Biblically-based teaching we've been having lately. These last several months – with a few notable exceptions – most of the preaching has been of the confessional or testimonial form, people introducing themselves or saying good-bye, letting us know how God is working in their lives. This is not bad, of course, but things were getting a little unbalanced. It's one of the perils of an open pulpit. As I recall, David said something to the effect that too often Seekers seems to believe in a di-une God. We don't have much trouble believing the God the Creator or God the Divine Parent; and we're all delighted to be in contact with the Holy Spirit; but we just don't seem to talk about Jesus much.

David is right, of course. Some of us have trouble saying that Jesus is the Christ, that he healed the sick and raised the dead, that he died on the cross and was buried and on the third day he rose, and that in him we, too, have eternal life. For those who grew up in churches that taught them that to doubt the truth of any part of scripture was to doubt all of it, as well as for those who grew up in no church at all, it is all too much. Because our rational, Enlightenment minds won't let us believe it literally, we refuse to believe it at all. Some of us are not sure that they are Christians – or perhaps are certain that they are not – because they cannot believe that what the Bible says is true.

I would suggest, however, that when we ask about the historicity, the factuality, of Biblical events, we are asking the wrong question. The truth of Scripture is not in the kind of facts that may be proven in a laboratory or in a court of law. The truth about Jesus is in the stories told about him, in the stories he told, in the power of the **idea**, the **story** that God loves us so much that God became human and walked and talked with us, and suffered a terrible death in order to understand us and walk with us in our daily pain and joy and heal us of our spiritual wounds.

The center of Jesus' teaching was not, after all, a set of postulates to be believed. Jesus taught through parables, stories that probably weren't factual, but that contained a deeper kind of truth about the human condition and about the nature of God. It seems to me that this is the way to read the Bible as a whole, especially, perhaps, the Gospels. The stories about Jesus' life are a series of parables, not exactly factually true – though based, I believe, on a kernel of facts, kept alive through the oral tradition until it was written down – but conveying the deeper truth about living here and now in the eternal realm of God.

Whether the bent-over woman really stood up straight is not the point – the point is that Jesus freed her from the spirit of infirmity that held her in its grip. The reality of our human bodies is that, no matter how carefully we take care of them, eventually they will wear out and die. We will have arthritis or cancer or Parkinson's disease or heart failure or something else. Our hair turns gray, our eyes and our hearing fail and our skin gets wrinkled. And our hearts will break with the injustice of the world, we will mourn the loss of loved ones, we will regret our mistakes. No matter how strong our faith, how deep our spiritual connection, Jesus will not protect us from the inevitable changes that life brings. What Jesus will do, if we let him, is free us from our **attachment** to infirmity, to believing that we are unworthy of live fully lived. What Jesus will do, is doing, is love us. Jesus teaches us to love the world as much as he did, to pour out our lives in loving, even to the point of death.

The Gospel according to John records that Pontius Pilate asked, "What is truth?" but does not reveal what, if anything, Jesus replied. We are simply left with the question, as Jesus is led away to the cross. Do we want truth, or lies? We need both, and neither. We need the rest of the story. And the rest of the story of about the bent-over woman tells us what the realm of God is like:

When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. And then Jesus said, "What is the realm of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." And again he said, "To what should I compare the realm of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." And Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. (Luke 13:17-22)