

A sermon by Rev. Dale Rosenberger, Senior Minister
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Do you recall stretching, enlivening breakthrough moments growing up as you realized that truth is expansive and spreads its wings much wider than you ever dreamt possible? Moments like seeing invisible organisms wriggle under a microscope or visiting a planetarium to learn how modest our sun and solar system are in an expanding universe. Moments like realizing that God--unlike a harried telephone operator--can hear all prayers of 7 billion people, know every hair on our head, and love us all like we were his only one. In such moments our smallish egocentric worlds explode into something vast and great.

We heard Jesus tell his followers, “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free, even though few of you will fully embrace it, and others will hate me for it.” As territorial, tribal and self-interested as most of us are in hearing truth and construing our little personal reality out of it, Jesus was the opposite. And I don’t only mean his awareness of the great beyond—“in my Father’s house are many rooms”—such talk as that. I also mean his willingness to hear the truth of lives very much unlike his own: from Roman soldiers, from hated Samaritans, from lowly fisherman, even from reviled tax collectors.

The watershed moment in the truth narrative surrounding Jesus comes as he is face to face with jaded, cynical, devious Pilate. Here Jesus’ life and death hangs in the balance. Truth for Pilate is whatever expedient moves help him get whatever he wants, which is usually placating oppressed subjects and keeping his derriere planted upon his throne.

“What is truth?” Pilate acidly asks Jesus. Jesus doesn’t dignify him with an answer...Or maybe Jesus’ answer came before when he described fulfilling our loftiest destiny. “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one reaches the truth of that place in life apart from the truth I live,” he said. Or maybe Jesus’ answer came three days after Pilate let a mob drive spikes through his body as truth rose anew at Easter, refusing to stay nailed down. Jesus shows the way in refusing to fear the truth and in trusting God’s truth to liberate us.

I picture truth—in its vast fullness—as a great tent; a tent so roomy in life’s circus as to include both magnificent rings as well as curious sideshows. Although truth is one, more than one kind of logic exists. That becomes clear as many types of logic can explain life.

For example, as a husband or wife says to the other, “C’mon, honey, just be logical,” one is ordaining his or her logic as the final and defining reality. That’s a foul. Throw a yellow flag! The logic of men and women differs. Both are legitimate...We also notice, for example, that the logic of woodworking differs from that of knitting, the logic of sailing differs from football, the logic of tribal jungle Aucas differs from British envoys. The logic of poets creating their verse vividly contrasts with accountants pouring over their books. It all depends on where you’re located, what questions you ask and what truth you seek.

Because today we welcome a distinguished scientific mind who practices his faith—Dr. Fraser Fleming—we focus on the logic of science and faith. And what I want to say is truth for one need not necessarily blemish and negate the other. Remember, the tent is big, right? But as the two differ, we'd better notice what each is and does, and learn how to expect of each only the questions that they are qualified to answer. Genesis, for example, asks who are we and why we are here; evolution asks how and what happened.

Maybe the most obvious difference is science is based upon objective truth and faith is based on subjective truth. But even that distinction begins to insidiously stack the deck. After all, in our public discourse, objective truth is solid and neutral. It is real and universal. Subjective truth is idiosyncratic, corrupted by feeling, less reliable, mere opinion. When we want to deflate a challenger's line of argument, we say, "But that's subjective."

Truth has a split personality--objective and subjective. But that need not drive us crazy. And neither is it true that objective truth is more rational than subjective truth. They are, as we have already rehearsed, different ways to construe reality from contrasting logics. In these few moments I can only contrast science and religion in a few ways, but maybe these few can shed light. And light is precisely what we're after today, friends, not heat.

Objective science is devoid of passion. Oh, it's ok to be curious, crave insight and feel deeply for the scientific method. But involving personal feelings--as in taking sides--is viewed suspiciously as injecting artifact into the results. Disinterested is a word used favorably in the scientific community. Detachment *enhances* results. Not so for religion. We take sides with the God who decided against Pharaoh and for those Hebrew slaves.

Subjective religious truth teems with passion. Passion not in a trivial sense like Madonna prancing in her underwear onstage but in a majestic sense, as we might speak of a wise judge's passion for justice, or an erudite professor and her deep passion to understand. For us faith is life's highest passion, more than justice or knowledge, beauty or romance. Much as science wants to bracket our humanity, Christianity wants to claim or inhabit it.

Of course, this is bad news for college 101 Comparative Religion courses. For the only way to grasp our faith is to try it on for size, personally participating in it. Our truth can't be known as theory. Without passion, without our involvement, Christian truth just won't yield itself. For a lack of passion obscures our truth much as science claims passion distorts its truth. Finally, we don't grasp the truth of Christian faith, so much as it grasps us.

Objective truth sees science marching forward to unlimited horizons of understanding with ever-increasing knowledge. Its method breaks things down into smaller constituent parts—called positivism--a chain of cause and effect from the past, leading to the future.

Subjective truth says reason or knowledge has real limits. That many of the most vital truths are beyond human understanding. Theologians use the word paradox for things you and I often call holy mystery. That God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself

is the greatest paradox ever. Our minds are too small to grasp it. Confessing the limits of reason is not a defeat to us because we believe it makes room to lift up and bring into play many undervalued capacities—such as hope, trust, and fidelity. We believe reason unchecked can become arrogant and even evil. Can anyone say nuclear arms? So paradox means that as we face our limits of understanding, as we bump up against profound mysteries that forever endure, we *stand under* them rather than *understand* them. We exist beneath them, living into their endlessly gracious mystery, as our years unfold.

Objective truth insists that empirical results should be demonstrable and repeatable. That is a cornerstone of science. But subjective truth asks: what if some of the greatest things in the history of the world only happened once? Moses ascending Mt. Sinai to let God show us the way forward. Jesus raised on the third day after cruel violence. These events only happening once in the world's history must be invisible to objective science.

Objective truth sees randomness in unfolding events, billiard balls colliding haphazardly. Subjective truth sees purpose beneath the randomness, God's will working itself out. We try to tap into the divine will. Science looks to things seen, things measurable, outward things. We attend to things unseen, things immeasurable, to things deeply inward.

As I contrast objective and subjective truth, science and religion, I'm not saying science bad, religion good. We already have enough clergy and scientists acting like one realm of truth must threaten the other. If it feels like I am taking sides--which I clearly am--it is only because we moderns find objective truth credible and subjective truth implausible. Mainstream Christianity has responded badly, with the tactics of appeasement, trying to make faith credible on the terms of modernity. That losing strategy concedes too much.

You notice that modernity often expects faith to submit to scientific criteria to be valid. How often do cynics scoff at the veracity of your faith by saying: so where is your proof? If you feel frustrated as that question places you in an impossible situation, here is why.

God is not an object, a thing. God is personal, a subject. No subject can be proven. It is an ignorant question. As casual detractors of our faith snidely ask me for proof, I answer their question with my own questions. Did your mother love you? Most will say, yes. Was your mother's love and care foundational who you are now? Mostly, another yes. *Prove to me your mother loved you!* They recite the history of their mother's devotion—care during sickness, protection in vulnerable times. And then I play the same doubting game. Maybe your mother only wanted you to finance her retirement. The point I am going after is that even the most essential and obvious subjective truths cannot be proven. Similar to the Christian faith, we can't prove that our mothers love us, but where would we be without the love of our mothers and how foundational that is to life as we know it?

When it comes to faith, evidence is beside the point. But even lacking proof, we do have centuries of living, sacrificial, loving human witness to God's truth in Israel and Jesus, generations who want it for their children. We want our young to be scientifically literate.

But we *crave* to bring them into relationship with God. We feature incredible devotion and untold sacrifice science can only dream of. I see it in all of you as you follow Jesus.

Ages ago, theology was called the “queen of the sciences.” The two got along well. But what was once linked is now split and likely won’t be soon reassembled. That saying implies scientific truth lives in service to eternal truths. Today few scientists believe that.

I like the Albert Einstein quote at the top of our flyer advertising the FCC, Darien science and religion Sunday: “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.” Can both sides say truth is bigger than we are? That truth in one doesn’t bar the other?

Humility becomes every human being. I observe that the smartest and best educated thinkers in science or theology tend to be ones most aware of how much we don’t know. They’re unthreatened by how small that makes us. It only makes life itself more majestic. Amen.