

Worship in Spirit and Truth

by Julie Grindle

[Jesus said to the Samaritan woman]: “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

(John 4:23–24; NRSV)

“The Language of God in a Post-Truthiness World” was the title of a short talk

I presented at an ALCM event a few years ago. My premise was that, aided and abetted by technological abundance, our digitally saturated society is quick to accept half-truths and false or misleading information: “if it feels right, it must be right.” I offer here an extension of that talk and consider its relevance for our worship and witness today, both in the midst of pandemic and as we emerge from it into a new reality of what it means to be church together.

Fact, Fiction, and Truthiness

The word “truthiness” gained widespread popularity after the inaugural 2005 episode of *The Colbert Report*, in which Stephen Colbert—playing a caricatured and satirized political pundit of the same name—introduced the noun to his audience. For both Colbert and the lexicographers who subsequently created dictionary entries for the term, “truthiness” referred to the quality of seeming or being felt to be true even if not necessarily true. In particular, it referred to decisions that prioritized feeling before fact, even adhering to feeling-based claims when presented with factual evidence to the contrary.

Truthiness used to be more subtle, less egregious. But time and technology have swept us into a new epoch characterized by post-truthiness,

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post-fact, and post-expertise thinking that permeates our national discourse—news media, social media, government, and more.¹ Now, potentially life-altering decisions are sometimes improvised according to instinct or process, completely disregarding fact. Truth can be manufactured or rewritten day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, meme by meme: a sensational or superficial tweet garners more attention than a thoughtfully nuanced thesis. This can leave one feeling queasy, not knowing which way is up, what news or science is contrived, which truths are true. This is a reality for most of our parishioners for the days and hours they are not with us in worship, Bible study, or rehearsal. This is a reality for us and for our children.

And now, siblings in Christ, the opportunities to interact with our communities are diminished on account of this pandemic. We worship in living rooms, family rooms, dining rooms, and kitchens—that is, if and when we attend worship at all. Zoom, Facebook, YouTube, and various forms of livestreaming may keep us socially connected, but the absence of the physical and corporeal marks of Christian assembly are deeply missed. I suspect and fervently hope that many still participate in ways encouraged by leaders, with bowls of water to remember our baptisms, with candles, and perhaps with instruments to help lead singing. But, try as we might, it isn’t the same, is it? There is something unsettling about the prospect of becoming disengaged and even more distanced from one’s community just when it seems to matter the most.



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How then do we worship in spirit and truth in such times? How do we battle the constant enemy of truthiness that has taken hold of our country and world, that daily undermines scientific truth, that lures otherwise logical people—including family, friends, and colleagues—into sharing false, misleading, or disingenuous content that pits us against one another? What can we as church bring to a time and place where our words or expressions are seemingly lost in this din of noise? What might Jesus’s words to the Samaritan woman in John’s gospel mean in our time and place, a time when we, too, thirst for living water in this desert journey?

First, we must be present. Whatever work is done, it must be work that reassures the people of God in our communities that God is present, the church is present, and that we can still be together even if apart for a time. Our synod staff has practiced this through an idea, courtesy of Pastor Lori Kochanski, of a “9@9” (nine minutes at 9:00 a.m.) every morning on Facebook Live. Each morning, one of the staff members uses their respective gifts to bring a message of hope, joy, lament, gospel, and community. For worshipping communities, there may be less need to be present every day; that would likely be too much work for a small staff. But any

offering—a short video about an upcoming Sunday hymn or lesson, or a story about something that one of the youths in your congregation is doing—is a way in which we can remain connected. We must stay connected. We must be present.

Second, we must be hospitable in radically different ways. How are we inviting people into community, online or on the phone, in creative ways? Once they are there, how are we welcoming them and holding their attention in a space where they can walk away at any time, often without us knowing? We must be intentional about spending time, perhaps more than usual, naming worries and joys, sorrows and needs. Only then, once the heart has been unburdened, can we bring the Good News. Only then can we say, “God is here!” Only then may we pray, “Come, Holy Spirit.” Our notions of gathering must adapt so that all may be ready, named, and open to hearing God’s life-giving and redeeming word, broken open for the sake of the world.

Third, everything we do forms those who attend. What we choose to do often says more than we realize about who we are and who we want to be. Even after we are able to gather again in our buildings, will you still offer a service that includes an online component? Are you in conversation with your leadership, the worship committees, youth, and those who are unable to attend regularly because of health issues but have consistently attended via Zoom? Carefully consider the context of your church’s ministry before indiscriminately copying models from other contexts. Perhaps a Sunday afternoon gathering is best for you and will continue to be, with prayers, a psalm meditation, and a blessing for the week. Or maybe you have a system in place that allows for livestreaming with hymns, readings, and a sermon. Or perhaps you are just gathering to pray, hear a lesson and meditation, and be reminded of your baptism.

Whatever you do, be intentional and use this as an opportunity to teach and be taught. Try not to overthink things—this is truly the time when “’tis a gift to be simple.” Let the creativity that flows

through the Holy Spirit move through your place: embrace what you can, shelve for later what might work another time, and make the best and most faithful choices you can with the hard decisions before you. Preach the truth, so that truthiness can be held at bay.

This is a fitting opportunity to lift up and equip lay leaders. Be attentive and astute when making liturgical choices. Perhaps some in the congregation want things done a certain way; perhaps some have demanded the opposite; perhaps some have threatened to stop giving or to leave if their preferences are not met. Perhaps this time invites more opportunities for congregational education and formation, for deeper conversations about lay ministry to lead to real action and service. We must be careful not to let truthiness creep into our theology and practice.

Fourth, we must leave space for grace. This is a tiring and confusing time, and we will continue to struggle with its outcomes. We will make mistakes, forget important things, say and do things we regret, lose our way, and watch others do the same. Freely ask for forgiveness, and make sure that every space you create is safe for others to admit their shortcomings as well. Be intentional about self-care, find time for Sabbath rest, and encourage similar expectations for those around you. This is how bodies and minds heal, and how the body of Christ is formed and re-formed. There is much beauty in these ways of being present, hospitable, attentive, and graceful.

Finally, we must find ways to empower all of the faithful to speak truth to truthiness, through the power of the Spirit. As noted in my original talk, the Holy Spirit works person by person, day by day, both inside and outside of our time. While the Good News is universal for all, it is lived out uniquely by each of us because our gifts and contexts differ. Faith relies on the Holy Spirit to be in us and work through us, to prune us and shake us and wring us out, to prod us and push us and love us into relationship with God and each other. And this is where truth is realized—in faith. Faith,

through the Holy Spirit, inspires our singing, our praying, our lament, our worship. Faith leads us to truth. Immutable, life-giving truth.

Stand firm, siblings in Christ, and don't lose hope. Continue to be the body of Christ, broken as we are but also redeemed, loved, and sent. Blessings in your vocations, and may you be filled with Christ's peace and joy as you bring God's truth and love to the world.



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Note

1. See, for example, Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Daniel J. Levitin, *Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era* (New York: Dutton, 2017).

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