

A Sermon from St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Salem, Oregon
Preached by the Rev. Anne Emry
Jeremiah 18:1-11, Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, Luke 14:25-33
September 8, 2019

We call God by many names: God the Father, the Good Shepherd, the Almighty, the Creator, the Word—these are all very familiar words for God familiar names for God. Perhaps less familiar are the words: the Potter, the Weaver, the Knitter...These are all true descriptions of God, but for the many things we can say about God, there is always more to say. There is truth in each of these, and in all of these...and yet there is so much more.

Truth—stay with me now—is like a beach ball. Imagine a beach ball: it has stripes, at least the one in my mind does, stripes of many colors. When we stand on the enormous beach ball of reality we see the color we are standing on. It's the lens that frames our understanding of the truth. Standing on a stripe, perhaps all we see isn't the color we are standing on. So let's follow the analogy further: that stripe might be blue or red or yellow—you can make each color a code for Science or Health or the Environment or Law or Finance or Politics... Many of us spend our lives delving into our discipline and that is how we see things. Every topic, if you are a teacher, becomes a topic related to Education. If we are surrounded by Finance, everything becomes a question of 'how do we do this right' as regards money. When we tell *our* truth, however, we might be talking to someone who is standing on a different stripe of the beach ball that says, "No, no, no, no, no *this* is the truth..." Probably why we fight so much.

"What is Truth? Is mine the same as yours?" These are the words Pilate addressed to Jesus. No, Pilate I can answer that one. Your truth is about absolute Power, wielded at the expense of the vulnerable. Your truth is about Empire, and a zero sum game. The truth about God, Jesus' truth, is about love and peace and discipleship. Pilate is standing on the Power stripe of the Beach Ball, and Jesus has the whole ball in his hand.

The call to discipleship in the Gospel names the truth that the *entire surface* of the Beach Ball is the way we live—it is our shared reality—and each stripe is a road to follow Christ. We can do that differently in our separate disciplines, vocations, and areas of expertise, but we are hearing in the Gospel that there is a right direction and a wrong direction. We hear Jesus is calling us to follow our road in the direction of the way he teaches—and if we are going the other way, to turn around. We are called to follow the pattern of the life of Christ. And, by the way, for those of you who heard the *financial* component in the Gospel or the perhaps the *diplomatic* component in the Gospel, don't stop there! Realize that what he is saying is: "Know what you're getting into!" His point is in the end, following him is going to involve everything you've got. There's no budgeting, there's no way of negotiating. It's all in, that's what discipleship is. There are many ways to respond to that call. Some of the Truth is present in each of these "stripes," in each of the ways we understand God and Creation. For me, you know it's the creative words that spark my imagination—the truth about God that calls God: Potter, and Weaver, and Knitter... the words that we have from Jeremiah and from the Psalmist: "Go down to the Potter's House...." God told

Jeremiah. I have something to say to you that you will only understand when you are watching that potter at work...

So, what is the truth in this text? God is saying, speak to my people, Israel and tell them that what they do matters. And that if they are not faithful and do not follow my ways they will collapse, like this pot that is flawed, that is not in balance, that is too thin or too thick or too structurally unsound, and I will begin again. Or, they can follow me and they will be my creation, my pot. What is the truth in this text... the living truth? (That's why we listen to these ancient texts that have been winnowed by time to the essential narratives that call us to God). What is the truth? Perhaps it is that God reshapes us, individually, into the people he wants us to be. You might be thinking of some event in your life that reshaped you—turned you around—some time when you felt God molding you. A closer reading would reveal the truth that God is talking about the whole community of God's people who are being reshaped, like a potter collapses a failed attempt to create a new pot. Or the truth might be that whatever dynamic is at work, there is a close, intimate relationship between the potter and the clay—the clay that bears the very fingerprints of the potter in the final creation. So God spoke to Jeremiah by creating and re-creating a work of art in clay... I always find that art is about more than itself (and here I include music, as well). Which brings me to the painting by Woody Gwyn that's on the cover of the bulletin.

I've known Woody Gwyn since I was a teenager. He started out in Midland, Texas, and lives in Galisteo, New Mexico, which has long been a community of artists. You might be interested to know he has spent a couple of summers painting at Cannon Beach. His paintings almost always include a road or highway...the human path through the landscape. Woody, personally, has a kind of "aw shucks" style, and calls himself an old-fashioned landscape painter, but I know better. Recently, he tells of a conversation he had with the abstract painter Agnes Martin, who also lived in Galisteo. She said "Woody, the paint begins to deteriorate the minute we put it on the canvas. Everything corrodes and turns to dust. But if we can get a little truth—just a little truth—into our paintings, then that can give an experience to someone who sees it, and it changes them, and that is what lasts forever... not the art itself but the truth and the impact of the truth."

I was in Santa Fe this summer and I got a chance to visit with Woody, and I saw the painting that is on the cover. It was just finished fairly recently...what you can't tell by looking at the photo is that the painting is huge. It is 5 ft. high and 10 ft. long. It's only a little smaller than Botticelli's Primavera. Both of those paintings, by the way, Ragged Edge and Primavera, use the medium of egg tempera, which was the most popular painter's medium up until about the year 1500, when oil painting took over. It is very idiosyncratic material to use these days, because it generally is used for very small paintings. To paint something this big, now, is an artist's eccentricity. Egg tempera continues to be the paint used in Greece and Russia for Orthodox icons—and like icons, this painting is a window to look through as well as a surface to look at.

Like Bierstadt's monumental landscapes from the 19th century, some of which were nearly the same size, the sheer size of the painting has a powerful effect. When Bierstadt took his paintings of Yosemite, and other paintings of the West, back to the East Coast and to Europe he had quite a carnival show to exhibit them, including having a heavy curtain that hung over the paintings. As

the crowd gathered and buzzed with excitement, he would tell them that, yes, this is really what the West looks like, and then finally he would unveil the painting by pulling back the curtain and people were shocked and amazed and I'm sure women fainted. I had something of that reaction when I first saw this painting.

It seems more real than real. So I have to wonder, after that conversation about truth with him, is the truth of this painting that this artist has the skill to perfectly mirror reality? Is that the truth? Or is the truth that the view conveys the grandeur of nature, divided by human shaping of the landscape by road and guardrail? And is that a good or bad thing? Is it a truthful rendering of the reality of that particular place? Or is the truth something that is less immediately obvious?

I'll give you a hint: don't let the "aw shucks" style fool you. Woody Gwyn is a modern painter. He represents the realism of the scene, but he is speaking to us through it. And I have learned—because I have seen many of his paintings—that the key question is: where is the viewer standing? Look at it. Where are you in relation to the scene? A few more hints: how high up are you? What are you standing on? Is this view even possible?

Someone suggested to me that it was painted from a photo taken by a drone. I assure you that is not how he works—this is an artist who uses medieval painting techniques, and he lives in a house that is 100 years old. He doesn't even have a cell phone! I promise you that is not how it was done.

In this painting, as in life, what you see to be the truth depends on where you stand. I believe the artist has situated us—the collective viewer—in a precarious place. We are on the line between the highway and the hill that falls to the ocean. We are on the line between the road and nature. I can tell you, having spent time with the painting in person, that it feels like you are standing several feet higher than the guardrail. It is a compelling, and a challenging, perspective.

I don't have a simple answer for what the truth is in this painting, and I certainly can't say what the artist would name as the truth he sees, but it is always a good thing to ask the question. It is always good not to assume that there is one answer that excludes all others. It is good to make room for a greater truth that encompasses all of the truths we might name. The shorthand for that is both/and, instead of either/or.

That greater truth is reached by listening and looking and thinking, and by asking thoughtful questions. Am I talking about this painting? Yes. And inspired by Jeremiah, and by the Psalm, I am also using the painting as a window to look through, like an icon, to catch a glimpse of the truth beyond it.

So watch the potter at work, and see God shaping our lives. Watch the weaver at work, and see how the threads of a divine textile reveal the creator's design. Watch the knitter at work and see how we are all connected. Listen to the many images and stories in scripture. They show us the road to follow to encounter the God who is our parent, our shepherd and the divine artist who loves us. Our God, who is the whole truth, who encompasses all truths: God who we know and worship as the Way, the Truth and the Life. **Amen.**