

TEXT: John 17:6-19  
THEME: We are made holy in the truth  
SUBJECT: Truth  
TITLE: Truth

Seventh Sunday of Easter  
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Messiah Moravian  
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Jesus spent much of his ministry debunking conspiracy theories. He knows the disciples will be confronted with conspiracy theories. The first one comes fast upon Jesus' resurrection; the disciples are accused of stealing the body. So Jesus prays for the disciples: "Sanctify them (make them holy) in the truth; your word is truth."

Jesus' prayer was not only for the original disciples but for all who, in the centuries to follow, follow Jesus. We cannot know the truth as impartial observers, spectators standing on the balcony of life. The truth Jesus teaches, the truth Jesus is, is truth from the road. We only know the truth that leads to the flourishing of life by walking in the way of Jesus.

David Jenkins' education was interrupted when he was called, at the age of 18, to military service in the autumn of 1943. He was decommissioned as a captain in 1946, and resumed his education at Queen's College, Oxford.

After graduation he became a lecturer in theology at Oxford University and, later, Professor of Theology at the University of Leeds. In 1984 Jenkins was appointed Bishop of Durham, replacing John Hobgood who became Archbishop of York.

His appointment attracted a lot of attention in the American press. He was consecrated in the venerable York Minster amid rumors of heresy, even of blasphemy, because he told a television audience, some three months earlier, that a modern Christian need not take everything in the ancient creeds literally.

12,000 people signed a petition protesting Jenkins' appointment. The dignified service of consecration was twice interrupted; at one point, a demonstrator briefly took over the lectern until dragged off by security guards. And then, three days later—the very next day after the Archbishop of York had preached in defense of his appointment of Jenkins—the cathedral was struck by lightning.

Even though the English were not much inclined to go to church in those days, they still loved a good theological controversy, especially if a bishop of the established church was involved. The newspapers, including the *Times* of London, were peppered with columns, letters, editorials arguing either that the lightning bolt was, or that it was not, a sign of heavenly displeasure with the consecration of Dr. Jenkins.

Others doubted whether the blaze had been caused by lightning at all. Arson was an alternative explanation, since once before (in 1829) a mad arsonist had tried to burn the minister down.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Runcie, had no explanation of why the fire started; but he agreed with the fire chief that God was “on our side,” for while the thirteenth-century wooden roof was consumed, the rose window was spared. The damage could have been a lot worse. The cathedral chapter (a college of clerics who advise the bishop) reassured everyone that the building was insured against such acts of God.

The amiable agnostic Conor Cruise O’Brien told the readers of the *Observer* that while the timing of the lightning bolt was impressive, he could not believe the fire-from-heaven hypothesis. *One* bolt of lightning may be set aside as coincidence. He added, however, that he would think again if *every time* Dr. Jenkins preached, the church he preached in were to be struck by lightning.

The Archbishop of York responded to this tempest in a English teacup saying: This is just the kind of thinking that the gospel was intended to put to an end, the kind of thinking that imagines sin and adversity are always related as cause and effect, so that if we observe one we should look for the other.

According to this kind of thinking, wherever we see human failure we can confidently predict divine judgment. Furthermore, wherever we witness pain or disaster, or experience them ourselves, there is some fault to uncover that made them happen. How many times have you looked for an explanation of pain suffered by loved ones in some failure of your own?

Jesus spends a lot of time dissuading folk of this kind of thinking. As Jesus and the disciples are walking and talking together, they pass by a man blind from birth. The disciples ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Who thinks like this? Many parents have wondered if something they did caused harm suffered by their children, but who could possibly believe a fetus capable of sin?

Jesus, having read Job, emphatically rejects the charge of sin against the parents or the fetus. It is curious how we prefer blame to not knowing. Our need to blame is a poorly disguised search for security. (If the cause of x is y and I haven’t done y than I am safe from x.) Jesus sees suffering as an occasion for compassionate action. Our need of a victim may also be an excuse not to care. (They got what’s coming to them.)

When a tower in Siloam fell killing eighteen people, Jesus asked “Do you imagine the tower selected the worst offenders to fall on?” On his way from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus is told of some Galilean pilgrims suspected of insurrection by Pilate. Pilate had them slaughtered along with their sacrifices. Do you imagine, Jesus asks, that these Galileans were worse sinners than any other Galileans because of what they suffered?

We live in a moment in time as head-scratching as when people believed a fetus could sin. How we can believe what we believe is unbelievable. It is as if truth was a fungible commodity, as if reality bent to our will, conformed to our wishes. The notion “That truth is the truth even if no one believes it, and a lie is a lie even if everyone believes it” is a relic of a bygone age.

To give up on the truth, to forego the pursuit of the truth, to fail to love the truth, whether in the field of science or history or philosophy or politics or theology, does not lead to believing nothing but to believing everything, even the most idiotic ideas imaginable; it is to descend into chaos and madness. The world is dying—quite literally—for a people capable of bearing witness to the truth.

According to John, the world prefers darkness to light, desecration to consecration. We must not despair. In a time when the church preferred darkness to light, desecration to consecration, Jan Hus bore witness to the truth with his life. Hus' motto was, "Seek the truth, hear the truth, learn the truth, speak the truth, adhere to the truth, defend the truth to death, for the truth will make you free."

At the beginning of John's gospel, Jesus is called the true light (John 1:9). Early in his ministry, Jesus interacts with Nicodemus and emphasizes that those who seek truth will come to the light (John 3:19-21). In the middle of his ministry he tells the disciples that if they abide in his teaching, they will know the truth and the truth will make them free.

Now, at the end of his ministry, Jesus sends his friends into the world to be witnesses to the truth. Why is Jesus' last will and testament a prayer for his friends to be "consecrated in truth," "made holy in truth?" Because to be *free* we must love the truth that moves the sun and stars more than we love power. Because to be *holy* we must love the truth that moves us to compassionate action more than we love security.