

Truth

First Reading: Psalm 25:1-10

Second Reading: Luke 23:43

I enjoy visual art, though I am not sophisticated enough to fully appreciate it, and will never be in a position to be a collector. I've followed the works of a couple of Charleston artists, Robert Lange and Joshua Flint, for perhaps twenty years, and though I could now afford the price of their early works when they were relatively unknown some twenty years ago, I could not begin to afford even the framing cost for what those same works would go for today. In any case, my appreciation of art remains limited to what I find visually captivating or what speaks to me. Edward Hopper and Vermeer are masters I enjoy.

I am undoubtedly ill-equipped to speak of the genius or method or technical brilliance of the artist, which leaves me unable to appreciate the value of works I do not understand or find appealing. So, I confess to be counted among those, who looking upon some pieces, can be heard saying, "Looks like something a 5-year-old could do."

I suppose that is more about my ignorance than the artist's talent ... but not always, because guess what? Sometimes, even the experts can be

fooled. Is it real ... or not? Consider the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat, the late Neo-expressionist artist whose work gained a following in the 1980's. I have to say my impression of the first painting I saw of his was that if a second-grader drew it during art class, that second-grader would be meeting with a social worker before the end of the school day. But what do I know, because Basquiat's paintings have sold for as much as \$110.5 million and hang on museums around the world. So, imagine the buzz generated in the art world upon the discovery of a cache of unknown Basquiats in a defaulted Los Angeles storage unit that had been snapped up by an auctioneer, like something right out of an episode of Storage Wars on A&E.

Supposedly unaware of the artworks provenance, the auctioneer sold the cardboard paintings on eBay. Soon, according to a Bianca Bosker article in *The Atlantic*, collectors lined up to buy them, and once in hand, set about confirming their hopes that these could actually be original Basquiats. (Bianca Bosker, *The Atlantic*) This effort included: a forensic analysis by a handwriting expert; an in-depth report by a Basquiat scholar; and a statement of authenticity signed by a founding member of a committee that the Basquiat estate had established to vet potential forgeries. A few experts asserted that

these paintings were, in addition to being authentic, were, in fact, some of Basquiat's best.

So, keep up with me here — an auctioneer buys the contents of a defaulted storage unit for about a thousand bucks; he sells the art on eBay for approximately \$17-20K; the collectors bring in the experts. Then, an appraiser values a group of just six of the thirty some-odd paintings at \$25 million. And by 2022 the Orlando Museum of Art debuted 25 of the discovered Basquiats in an exhibition, making a huge splash in the art world.

Amazing, right? A sum of four figures becomes a sum of well north of 9 figures in less than ten years. Astounding, right? Well ... not so fast. Four months into the Orlando exhibit, the FBI seizes the paintings on suspicion of fraud, and before long the auctioneer back at the storage unit is confessing to the authorities that he and a buddy forged the paintings, and, get this, he said they spent a maximum of 30 minutes on each painting, and as little as 5 minutes on others. Wild story. Let the credits roll.

But wait ... that's not all! There are experts, lawyers, and collectors who remain convinced that the fake Basquiats are actually authentic, and

that it is the auctioneer's confession that is fraudulent, and so the mystery continues.

What is real, and what is not? What is true, and what is not? Given the limits of the human mind and our physical senses, how certain can we ever be about what is true, what is real? And yet, we frame our lives around truths we can never verify or fully agree upon.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. Sounds good, but what would Abigail Adams or Sally Hemings have had to say about that come election season? What would Emmitt Till, Ruby Bridges, or Charlotte's own Dorothy Counts have had to say about that while sitting in a segregated waiting room? What would Geronimo, Jim Thorpe, or Madonna Thunder Hawk offer to that conversation? What about a young woman in today's Alabama? We have a history of moral blindness, hypocrisy, prejudice, and amnesia even when truth is self-evident.

That late curmudgeon, Andy Rooney, said, "People will generally accept facts as truth only if the facts agree with what they already believe." I

don't know when the *60 Minutes* legend said that, but Andy's observation was prescient in describing the culture we live in today. Facts, science, and even reality have become as malleable as *Play Doh* in an environment where truth is a commodity you shape to your purposes.

It has become au Courant to qualify your opinions, priorities, worldview with the assertion — *I'm just speaking my truth*. My truth — Could there be anything more dangerous than that? We can never own the truth. At best, we can shape our lives around what we believe to be true. Some people see that truth to be power; others see it as a culture of celebrity, clicks, and likes. Other lives seem focused on blame, or suspicion, or hate.

Politicians today tend to put their greatest trust in fear, the pollsters convincing them that if they can generate fear, loyalty will jump on board and come along for the ride. Today, there are eery echoes re-emerging from horrendous movements of the past. In the early 1920s in the state of Indiana, the political machinery, the judicial and police power, a good percentage of Protestant churches, and indeed the public square became dominated by the ideologies of the Ku Klux Klan, whose espoused truths

included racial purity; eugenics; white superiority and racial segregation; anti-immigration; anti-Semitism; anti-Catholicism; and anti-anyone they deemed to be a threat to their power. The king-making, political boss towering over this expanding machinery of hate was a garrulous, yet soulless, con man by the name of D.W. Stephenson, who could lie as easily as he could breathe. In Timothy Egan's powerful new work, *A Fever in the Heartland*, Stephenson is described as a force "who had taken up the cause of racial purity by legislation **with the confidence of a man whose convictions were shaped by the uncomplicated concision of crackpots.**"

Stephenson was a veritable PhD in conspiracy theory. Here was someone who could tell a crowd that cigarettes cured cancer, and the people would not only believe him; thereafter, they would deny any science that proved otherwise. The one truth Stephenson did have a handle on was that fear sells, a truth countless bloggers, podcasters, and conspiracy theory peddlers these days have weaved into a multi-billion dollar business.

Do you have a good mirror at home? Because it will take a special kind of mirror to make you see how powerful an influence fear has on your life, and knowing that power, there are countless voices nudging you toward

the zip code of the absurd. The technology has changed, but in the 1920s, Stephenson knew how to move a message, no matter how ridiculous it might be. Egan reports that: “Folks got their news from editors loyal to the Klan or from a gossip chain that started with a Klan poison squad plant. They took their moral guidance from preachers in the pocket of the hooded order.” (Timothy Egan, *A Fever in the Heartland*)

And guess who was watching all of this? A group of resentful outsiders in the wake of the humiliation of WWI in Germany. The Nazis were quick learners, and they forged those ideas into fear-driven convictions of hate that would result in the deaths of millions.

Yet, as the Nazis sought to use the German church to propagate their creed, a group of pastors and theologians formed an underground church, devoid of Nazi ideology, from which they could declare their resistance to Hitler and the Third Reich. Our Affirmation of Faith today is taken from their work to distinguish the church of Jesus Christ from what was happening in the coopted German church. So, in the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, they declared: “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we

have to trust and obey in life and in death ... We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation ... [The Church] has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely [Christ's] property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance."

My truth? Your truth? The candidate's truth? The podcaster's truth? Twitter/X, Reddit, Truth Social, Facebook — their truth? Given how easily the human mind is manipulated and moved without its own awareness, I don't think I want to hang my hat on those hooks.

On what word, what truth will your life depend?

John 1:14 — "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

John 1:17 — "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

James 1:18 — “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

John 8:31-32 — Jesus said, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Amidst all the claims to truth, on what truth will your life depend? When Nazi ideology and language polluted the church, the underground professing Christians offered their response to this question — “We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords—areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.” And today, through the barrage of noise, we must diligently ask the question, does what all those fear peddling voices are saying about Christian values look anything like the Jesus revealed in the Gospels? Many times in the year before us, the answer will be, no.

To the criminal crucified along with him, Jesus said, “Truly, I tell you...” In a way it was redundant, for Jesus is truth and truth is Jesus, and this truth thinks enough of you, that he’d willingly go to the cross for you, whoever you may be.

On what truth will your life depend? Through what truth will you see your world? When Jesus reports to Pilate that he has come to bear witness to the truth, Pilate asks, “What is truth?” Frederick Buechner pointed out that through the years there have been politicians, scientists, theologians, philosophers, and so on to answer Pilate’s question, “and the sound they make is like the sound of empty pails falling down the cellar stairs.” What is truth? “Jesus doesn’t answer Pilate’s question. He just stands there. *Stands, and stands there.*” (Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*)

Make [us] to know your ways, O Lord;

teach [us] your paths.

Lead [us] in your truth, and teach [us],

for you are the God of [our] salvation;

for you [we] wait all day long. Amen.