

INTRODUCTION

Now admit it. You almost didn't pick up this book because it has "truth" in its title, and who wants to talk about truth nowadays? According to who you ask, it has become too noxious to talk about, too wearying to talk about, too heated to talk about, or too impossible to talk about. Mention the word from the pulpit and people tune out . . . or write letters to your bishop. They accuse you of being too political . . . or too out of touch with the world today. The word has become tarnished—mottled and blackened with misuse and misunderstanding. So, can we who preach, teach, and lead in a broken Church floundering in a tangled culture still talk about truth?

Grammarians will suggest I have the question wrong. Shouldn't it be "May we talk about truth?" But that's easy. Of course, preachers, teachers, and others who lead *may* talk about truth. Depending on your favored translation, the word *truth* appears in the Bible over two hundred times. It is a frequent theme in the writings of recent popes and consistently weaves its way through stories of the saints. We might even say that it is such a central theme in Christianity that it is the *duty* of preachers and others who lead to talk about truth.

But there are so many ways it can go wrong, and has. When I started floating drafts of this project among friends, one immediately wrote back, "Truth is a trigger word for me, having been beaten up by it in the past. . . . [I] get anxious when someone

wants to preach on truth. . . . [It was] used as a club over my head.”¹ Not an uncommon reaction. Sincere and good-willed religious leaders, impelled by a sense of preaching duty, sometimes end up doing harm, turning people off not only to the truth of Jesus Christ but to the very notion of truth itself. As a preaching instructor, I have watched any number of preaching students go about their initial attempts with gusto—the word *truth* sprinkled in every other sentence that comes out of their mouths—while the opening chords of “Fools Rush In” play in the back of my head. We *may* talk about truth, but I’m not sure it is having the impact we want.

At the same time, I suspect the experienced preaching angels who no longer dare to tread in the vocabulary of truth are not doing us any favors either. Aware of the dangers and complexity of the term, many back away from talking about truth in the pulpit altogether, unintentionally contributing to the profound cultural confusion we now find ourselves in—what many have termed a *post-truth society*. These preachers and their counterparts in teaching and pastoral leadership cede their duty to address the topic and, as a result, many Christians’ ongoing instruction on truth has come only in the form of debating heads and Facebook memes. We live in hope that giving differing perspectives equal airtime will somehow lead to greater clarity and consensus on issues, but lost in the conversation is something fundamental: Does it matter whether these varying perspectives offered are true? In our present moment in history, can we still talk about truth?

The question is not “May we?” (Answer: Yes.) And the question is not “Should we?” (Answer: Also yes.) The question is “Can we?” That’s harder, because it requires we figure out a way to overcome both our brazen certainty and our untimely reticence in order to speak effectively on a contentious concept with equally certain and reticent hearers. It’s harder because these are hearers who’ve tried and so often failed in their own conversations about truth with families and friends. It’s harder because they come to us angry,

tired, and belittled. They come to us—like my friend—triggered and wounded. It’s harder because their experiences have left them wrestling with a whole skein of tangled questions: “What is truth? Why does it even matter? Does anyone really know what’s true? Who’s to judge? Aren’t we all entitled to our own opinions? What am I supposed to do when others don’t agree with what I know is true? What do I do if someone is lying? Isn’t it best to sometimes fudge the truth? Why can’t we all just get along? How do I stay friends with someone who’s so clearly wrong? Should I even bother to host Thanksgiving dinner again?”

Can we really disentangle *that* knotted mess? Given the current climate, can we still say something meaningful about truth from the pulpit—and by extension in the classroom and in the boardroom—that could help real hearers in real time?

Yes, I think we can.

What gives me hope is my own story. Granted, I might have a bit more of an obsession with questions of truth than most. My mom traces my fixation to the Santa Claus Incident of 1976. Apparently, when I found out that Santa Claus wasn’t real, I “didn’t handle the news very well.” That is her description, not mine. I say I “handled the news” as any perfectly reasonable person would upon discovering the world wasn’t the place she had imagined it to be and that she had been lied to on this matter for her entire life by parents, aunts, uncles, older cousins, and the much-treasured J. C. Penney’s Christmas catalog.

My high school journals are peppered with statements such as “Then he said . . . but the truth of the matter is . . .” and “Honestly, I don’t think it’s fair that . . .” As a teenager, I was pretty sure I had a handle on the truth. I knew things. I didn’t doubt myself. I doubted my parents. But I didn’t doubt my own ability to assess how things “really are.”

Time in Africa as a college student turned that confidence upside down and shook it like a cocktail. Teaching for four years on the island of Guam shook my assumptions even more. The

experience of being married and having a child dropped a cherry on top. I had thought I knew what was real, but clearly I had been wrong. Who's right? Can anyone know anything for certain? How can two people of goodwill who love each other still see things so differently?

What kept me tethered on this tumultuous ride was my ongoing relationship with the wider Church community. I was blessed throughout my childhood, my teen years, my college campus ministry years, and then into my adult years with a handful of extraordinary preachers and teachers who helped me work through my questions and disappointments (of which the Santa Claus Incident was but the first). They did so by drawing on the rich Catholic tradition surrounding the topic of truth, and it made a world of difference to me. They helped me understand that I wasn't the first one to be asking these questions or suffering these disappointments. I wasn't the only one to wonder about how we know what we know or the best way to build a life in a world filled with ambiguity. Slowly and surely, they disentangled my own knot of questions and assumptions and, when they couldn't sort the knot themselves, they taught me how to stay with the knot and not give up.

Among my most treasured interlocutors have been members of the Order of Preachers, more widely known as the Dominican Order. The Dominicans were founded with a charism for truth—a special tenacity in pursuing truth-related questions when others would have called it a day. They offered me a doorway into the theology of truth, or to use Anselm of Canterbury's classic definition, faith seeking an *understanding* of truth. They introduced me to Thomas Aquinas, who thought and wrote about this topic more than most in human history. But after twenty years, I would say the Dominicans' greatest gift has been introducing me to a *spirituality* of truth, which I am going to define as "faith seeking a way to *live* truth." I root this definition in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, found in the Gospel of John. Jesus tells his nighttime disciple that only the one who "*lives* the truth comes to the light"

(Jn 3:21). In the same way that “live the bicycle” sounds to me like another way to describe “bicycling,” “live the truth” sounds to me as if Jesus thinks of truth more as a verb than a noun. He wants us to engage in the act of “truthing.” The Dominicans are adamant that truth is meant to be understood as a whole way of life, and by the witness of *their* lives have given me some idea of how that works.

The Dominicans were also founded with a charism for preaching—a special tenacity for keeping a conversation going even when the issues at stake are hard to articulate and nuance is of the essence. It has been an honor over the course of the past two decades to become ever more enfolded into their preaching mission and to be invited to think together with them about how we might articulate and nuance truthing better. They also know there are so many ways it can go wrong. In eight centuries, they’ve had the chance to mess up a time or two . . . or two thousand. My point here is simply that preaching about truth is tricky, teaching about truth is tricky, leading others in pursuit of truth is tricky—not only at this moment in time but in every age of history. Dominicans have taught me that we need not get discouraged by our failures and abandon talking about truth, but rather learn from our messes and continue to sort what works from what doesn’t.

WHAT DO WE WANT TO SAY?

So, if we wanted to take on the challenge of talking about truth in a positive, impactful way (no clubs over the head!), what is the wisdom of the broader Catholic tradition—rooted in scripture and reflected upon by the Church for twenty centuries—that we want hearers to access and *live* related to truth? Where do we even begin?

First, a word about where we won’t begin: In this book, you will find little discussion of God as Truth or Jesus as Truth, or the Bible and Catholic doctrine as Truth—capital-*T* Truth. Like

you, I share the conviction that all these are Truth. But we cannot begin there because such statements presume we (including our hearers) all share a common understanding of what the word *truth* means, and I do not think we can presume that anymore, dare I say even among devout Catholics. Those who see their ministry as “preaching the Truth” often begin with an unnecessarily narrow definition of small-*t* truth. Capitalizing the *T* does not expand their definition; it only means that we begin to look at God, Jesus, the Bible, and doctrine in correspondingly narrow ways.

The situation mirrors trying to preach “God is Love” in a congregation riddled with domestic violence or sexual abuse. If these are the experiences that have shaped members’ definition of love, then applying the term *love* to God in this context is more harmful than helpful. We would need to remedy the hearers’ definition of love first—clarifying what love is not and widening their understanding of what love is.

We will return to Truth at the end of the book. But first we need to take a step back. We need to start by clarifying for ourselves and for our hearers what small-*t* truth is not and widening our understanding of what small-*t* truth is. Indeed, we want to do a 360 view of the term. Doing a 360 requires we position ourselves to look at truth from a number of directions. Like the mysterious cherubim in the biblical book of Ezekiel, we could say that truth—as pondered in the broader Catholic tradition—has four faces, each concerning itself with a different aspect of our human struggle and each speaking to a different set of our oh-so-difficult questions. Or using the metaphor of a diamond, perhaps it is easier to visualize truth as having four facets.

1. *One facet of truth gazes upon our lifelong struggle to perceive the world as accurately as possible.* It concerns itself with making sure that our minds are aligned with what really is, rather than imaginary things. It recognizes that a solid picture of reality is essential for

our survival, so it cares a great deal about our ability to grasp *the facts*.

2. *A second facet of truth watches over our struggle to interpret the happenings of our world and make sense of them.* Recognizing that we live in a pluralistic society that interprets things in many different ways, it is concerned with our ability to judge among various interpretations and opinions to fashion lives that are oriented toward *the good*.
3. *A third facet of truth focuses on our struggle to communicate with one another toward the building up of society.* Because society depends on being able to trust one another's words, it is concerned with our human propensities to lie or share half-truths as well as our propensity to say too much. It wants to help us find the right balance, or what we might call *the truthful*, in our speech.
4. *A fourth facet of truth considers our struggle to "be true" in long-term relationships with one another.* It is concerned with our capacity to remain faithful in the kinds of ways that God is faithful, even in times of profound disagreement with one another. It wants to help us figure out which actions are the *most loving*.

Each of these facets has something distinctive to contribute toward our efforts at living truth in a post-truth world. At the same time, no single facet of truth can stand alone. Each facet needs the other three to fully represent the tradition's wisdom on truth. As we begin to look for opportunities to talk about truth from the pulpit, in the classroom, and in the boardroom over the course of the liturgical year, we want to look for opportunities to introduce and reflect upon all the varied facets of truth, rather than speaking repeatedly of only one facet of the whole.

THE ART OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

As Catholic preachers, teachers, and other Church leaders, talking about truth effectively requires not only knowing the tradition's

wisdom on the matter but also knowing how to share it in a way that can be understood and remembered. Because I am a teacher of homiletics, I will write much of what I want to communicate in this book from the perspective of preaching, leaving to you, at least at times, the imaginative connections to other kinds of leading and talking about truth in the life of the Church.

We all know very well-educated preachers who lose their congregations during their opening lines. Likewise, we've watched teachers losing the class, or bishops, pastors, directors of religious education, and other ministry team leaders losing their audiences early and irredeemably. Why is this? Let's consider what we are learning about preaching from the field of homiletics about what doesn't work that can inform all of our public speaking in the Church.

- *Preaching that has multiple points doesn't work.* For a good portion of the Church's history, preaching was a form of evening entertainment in the community, and before the advent of widespread literacy, hearers were capable of listening for long periods of time and holding multiple thoughts. Literacy, and now the advent of visual media, has changed the way people hear. The modern mind cannot absorb by ear what the ancients did.
- *Preaching that uses lots of academic (including theological) language doesn't work.* Preachers should be steeped in theology but able to communicate theology in an accessible manner. Academic language works in writing because it allows the writer to condense a great deal of information into a small space, but it does not register in the ear of most of the faithful. Words that have Latin prefixes and suffixes do not stick in hearers' memories.
- *Preaching that is disconnected from hearers' lives doesn't work.* Hearers tune out when preachers attempt to answer questions they personally are not asking and offer examples that feel distant from their everyday realities.

- *Preaching that robs hearers of their moral freedom doesn't work.* Hearers do not like to be told what to do or have their current efforts to live their faith underappreciated by the preacher. Multiple *shoulds*, *musts*, and *need tos* make hearers tune out.
- *Preaching that sets up an us-versus-them mentality doesn't work.* Preaching that condemns or demonizes a particular group or viewpoint increases the engagement of hearers who already share the preacher's perspective, but for hearers who in any way empathize with the *them*, it increases the likelihood of dismissing the entirety of what the preacher has to say, not only in the preaching at hand but in future preaching as well.

What are we learning about preaching that works best?

- *Preaching that works has one point.* The preacher can use multiple examples and experiment with creative forms to get that one point across, but afterward listeners should be able to summarize the preacher's key message in thirty words or less. You know that a preacher has reached a basic level of effectiveness if various hearers can summarize the preacher's key message in much the same way.
- *Preaching that works imitates conversational language.* Even if a preacher chooses to write out a text, the language used needs to imitate how people talk in everyday speech. Pope Francis calls for preaching in the kind of language a mother uses when talking to her children. I imagine the speech patterns of friends who've had one beer or glass of wine together. The most effective language evokes the senses so that the message registers not just in the hearers' minds but also in their bodies.
- *Preaching that works is strangely specific.* Hearers want to sense that the preacher knows and loves them. They perk up when the preacher speaks to a question that they personally have been wrestling with and relates stories that mirror the dynamics of their own experiences, even if the details are quite different.

Curiously, generic preaching examples (e.g., “We all have experienced going to the grocery store . . .”) register far less than highly specific references (e.g., “I was musing in the cereal aisle . . .”). The latter sticks in the mind even if the hearer doesn't eat cereal.

- *Preaching that works emphasizes autonomy and appreciation.* Effective preaching presumes goodwill on the part of hearers and highlights the efforts they are already making to live the Gospel. It also acknowledges their freedom to respond or not to the preacher's message, realizing that the hearers will need to be the ones who decide how to embed the message in their particular lives.
- *Preaching that works anticipates a diversity of perspectives.* Effective preaching acknowledges a diversity of viewpoints and assumes that diversity is present within any group of hearers. The preacher treats viewpoints different from their own with the greatest charity possible, conveying a sense that “we're all trying to figure this out together.”

Why have I stopped at five bullets in each category? Because five is the maximum that even readers can absorb at any one time. But also because I think these five bullets capture the basics we want to hold to as we attempt to preach on any topic, including the topic of truth.

HOW WILL THIS BOOK HELP YOU TALK ABOUT TRUTH?

Our job as preachers, teachers, and Church leaders is to marry the wide wisdom of the tradition regarding truth with the marks of effective preaching and see what kinds of sparks fly. Maybe we can help ancient ideas feel relevant again. Maybe we will be able to clarify for hearers what now seems so befuddled. Maybe we

can recover a space for truth in everyday conversation. Maybe we can offer powerful witness as to what it means to live truth in our post-truth era. Are you getting excited about exploring these possibilities with me? Feeling a little less weary than when you picked up this book and a little more curious about what you might try in your own community?

In this book I've taken the liberty to sort the messy everyday truth questions raised earlier into four categories, corresponding to the four facets of truth. (I've added a few more that your hearers probably aren't currently asking but likely will once you open Pandora's box on the topic of truth, because I want you to feel prepared.) Each chapter summarizes a bit of wisdom from the Catholic tradition to help contemporary hearers wrestle with their questions—certainly not all that could be said on the topic, but a place to begin. Even if we can't resolve these questions once and for all, we'll discover that tradition gives us frames for thinking and talking about truth that can ease the consternation so many of us are feeling at present and inspire ideas for moving forward. (One question I will not address is what to do about hosting Thanksgiving dinner. I think even Thomas Aquinas would back away from that one!)

Sample preaching texts are integrated throughout each chapter to illumine how you might share tradition's insights from the pulpit while trying to hold to the markers of effective preaching I've described. Most of the preaching samples included have been shared in congregations during the past few years. In some cases, the text has been revised significantly based on congregational response. The samples represent preaching I have done in a variety of settings—Eucharist, Liturgy of the Hours, retreats, online reflections, workshop openings. (So many opportunities we have to talk about truth and to invite others to talk about truth!) The danger in offering any preaching text is that an event meant to be aural is experienced instead in writing, and the connection to a very specific group of hearers is lost. But my hope is that in

reviewing tested samples, you become increasingly confident that you also *may*, *should*, and—most importantly—*can* talk about truth from the pulpit, in your classroom, or at the board table. By the end of the book I want what presently feels daunting to feel more manageable. I want you to close the back cover and say to yourself, “No doubt about it, I can do this!”

Before you close that cover, I’ve included a preaching assessment tool that you can use when reviewing the preaching samples, checking them against the marks of effective preaching I’ve described. I won’t be offended if you don’t think every preaching hits every mark. Maybe you will want to take a stab at editing some of these samples to make them more effective. You might want to make copies of this assessment to review your own preaching texts, lecture notes, or pastoral announcements as well. Because truth is such a multifaceted topic, and it is so challenging to preach, teach, or simply talk about truth effectively, if you are regularly engaged in these ministries of the Word, consider inviting others who do likewise to share their own preaching texts, lessons, lectures, or videos to review together. We can continue to learn about how best to talk about truth from one another’s successes, and perhaps even more from one another’s flops. Questions for personal reflection and/or dialogue within small groups have been included at the end of each chapter.

There are many days I turn on the television and still “do not handle the news well.” But increasingly there are days when I think as a preacher and teacher I can be a part of the solution. I can be part of retrieving that tarnished word *truth* from the world of debating heads and conflicting memes, and with some spit and hard work, help truth recover a bit of its luster. I *can* talk about truth in positive, impactful ways. And, best of all, I can be a part of living truth in this present age, sure of the coming light.

A preaching sample to get us started . . .