

Chapel Talk
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What is truth?

This is the rhetorical question uttered by Pontius Pilate in the book of John as he tried to discern the identity of Jesus and struggle with the decision of whether or not to crucify him. This seems like a simple question, one that we have all asked, and yet despite all the beautiful, lyrical, inspiring phrases in the Bible, this is my favorite passage; it gives me chills and often haunts me on my spiritual journey.

Truth. It is a simple word that can often seem static, flat, obvious, an idea that we can take for granted. As children we are merely asked to always “tell the truth.” Yet within that small word lies degrees of honesty, differing perspectives, hope of what the truth could be, hope of what it is not, the history that brings us to the moment of truth, all of which brings us back to the humility, consternation, curiosity and hope enveloped in Pilate’s question of “what is truth?”

Perhaps I have never wrestled with that question more tangibly than when I traveled to Cuba this past summer. I thought that I knew the truth as I disembarked the plane in Havana –Castro was an evil dictator that passed his reign on to his oppressive brother and that most commoners were looking for a boat to escape to the shores of the United States. In twelve short days my perspective was completely shaken.

I met people content to have rationed food in order to sacrifice their needs for the needs of their fellow citizens, so that no one would starve. Yet then I spoke with an elderly man that stated yes, I have bread, but is that life?

I heard the names Fidel and Raul spoken with affection, tenderness and reverence when I had only heard the word Castro spoken as a hiss in my childhood. I heard him referred to as a father, but wait, wasn’t he a murderer?

I perused photos of Che Guevara, Raul and Fidel that Cubans had voluntarily hung on the walls in their homes, in their offices, and placed on their desks. But wait, was Castro not a dictator that took control through bloodshed and fear?

I felt embraced by a people eager to share their story, their food, their rich heritage. But wait, hadn't I been taught that Cubans hated Americans?

I saw a billboard that pronounced that the American blockade, or embargo, was the longest genocide in the history of the world. But wait, wasn't Fidel Castro the torturer? The tyrant?

I saw people living a humble life, but I saw no one without clothing and no one spending the night on a park bench. I saw hospitals deteriorating on the inside, but learned that Cuba has some of the best medical schools in the world. I saw socialism at its best. I saw socialism at its worst.

Were these people brainwashed into loving Castro through the propaganda? Is their propaganda all that different from the propaganda that leads us to hate Castro? If no man goes hungry, if every child has a roof over his or her head, if students can obtain any level of education that they desire at no cost to them, if every life is given hope through free health care, if each citizen sacrifices for his or her fellow man –is that evil?

Of course upon my return I was met with great opposition to even pondering such a thought. My family and friends listened graciously and then insisted that I could not possibly understand the truth. Did I know what it felt like to listen to the news and hear that Castro's forces had marched into La Plaza de la Revolución claiming victory on January 1, 1959? Did I bear witness to the catastrophe of the Bay of Pigs? Had I ever hidden under my desk as a child during a missile strike drill? Of course the answer to each of these questions was "no" and again my mind was reeling from what I had seen, heard and felt in a place that had become magical to me and reeling from the position that my fellow Americans tried to impress upon me. Where and what was the truth?

In those moments I must return to my one solid, steadfast truth, the one truth that is unflappable in my life and that is that Jesus died for me and that He has a plan. Does that solve all of my questions

with regards to Cuba? Absolutely not. Some might see this statement as a cop-out to actually investigating the truth in Cuba. However, it gives me the liberty to accept that I do not know the whole truth, that I am not expected to know the whole truth, that the whole truth is greater than I am, more complicated than I can comprehend. It allows me, therefore, to doubt, question, search, listen, explore and hope to be allowed to find moments of truth that God will reveal incrementally when He knows that I am ready. I have complete faith that there is a truth in the midst of the tumultuous, confounding and at times heartbreaking moments in life.

In the book *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel the protagonist, Piscine Patel, is a young man thirsting after spiritual fulfillment and he finds it in Islam, Hinduism and Christianity all at the same time. He is a young boy desperate and called to live a life of faith. He states “I’ll be honest about it. It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while. We all must pass through the garden of Gethsemane. If Christ plays with doubt, so must we. If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer, if He burst out from the Cross, ‘my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ then surely we are also permitted to doubt. But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.” I reread and reread this passage, dog-eared it, returned to it for days yearning to internalize it. The freedom of doubt, the necessity for doubt, the ache for answers, the return to one truth –I was enraptured by the claim of this fictional character that put words to my internal reality. I also realized as I reflected on my affinity for this passage and my spiritual life at school that the two people with whom I have shared the most about my faith are Ms. Reddy and Dr. Johnson, two atheists. All three of us have surveyed the world, searched our hearts and minds and we have each taken a leap of faith, only in opposite directions. Piscine Patel also states that “atheists are my brothers and sisters of a different faith, and every word they speak speaks of faith. Like me, they go as far as the legs of reason will carry them and then they leap.” And it is the fact that Dr. Johnson, Ms. Reddy and I all have these strong tenets that we are able to challenge each other, debate the existence of a higher power, discuss the creation of the world and analyze our purpose in it in a meaningful, respectful, and educated fashion. I would not trade these conversations with these two friends of antipodal faith because they push me to delve deeper into my own faith, steer me back to look for answers in the Bible, push me to engage my Christian friends in the same lines of conversation to hear their thoughts, they force me to open a

new avenue of prayer, to develop new questions to which I ask for answers when God is ready to reveal them. And in those moments it is okay for me to doubt.

I once read, “who never doubted, never half believed. Where doubt is, there truth is –it is her shadow.” My moments of apprehension only lead me to desire to know God better and to understand more fully the world that He created. The moment that I profess to Dr. Johnson that I have all of the answers is the day that my faith has died and I believe that the day that Dr. Johnson claims that he has all the answers he ceases to be a scientist. We both have our one truth that we cling to that allows us both to explore the same world with awe and reverence, passion and curiosity because we are actively waiting for the next piece of truth to be revealed.

But that revelation is not always immediate, it is not always obvious and that interval of time can be disheartening, concerning and frustrating. Isaac the Syrian, a 7th century bishop and theologian stated that “If you love truth, love silence.” After meditating over that quote it seems to me that sometimes that means that the silence is the truth. When you sit with a loved one who is in pain, your simple presence, not your words, is the truth of your friendship. Sometimes the silence is actually the answered prayer- you asked for something and in His grace He is not granting you that request because it is not in His perfect will for you. And yet sometimes He is teaching you in that silence; perhaps He is instructing you on patience, perseverance, humility, contentedness or dependence on Him –all this so that when portions of the truth are exposed you are ready to understand it, bear it, believe it, glorify Him in it.

I do not expect each of you to walk out of this chapel this evening having had a revelation or ready to take a leap of faith towards one absolute truth. However, I do hope that you will begin to form or perhaps refine one belief that you hold either tenderly, hesitantly or ferociously to be true.

From 1951 to 1955 the CBS Radio Network ran a program entitled “This I Believe.” It was a five-minute program that aired daily during the week in which one person shared a short essay on one tenet that they held to be true. It was not meant to be a religious series, but rather an opportunity for movie stars, authors, politicians, musicians and then, later on, commoners to inspire an anxious nation by sharing their most trusted convictions. Jackie Robinson, Martha Graham, Eli Wiesel,

Helen Keller, Eleanor Roosevelt, Albert Einstein, Harry Truman, Leonard Bernstein and others all wrote 500 word essays proclaiming one truth that helped them navigate through life. The essays were then compiled into a book and now there are multiple editions because people continue to be inspired and compelled to define and then share the belief that they value most. Each book is a beautiful compilation of the soul of humanity. Each essay is a unique statement mostly of hope in mankind, a nation, a higher power, an innate goodness in the world.

After losing her daughter, acclaimed author Isabel Allende, adopted the belief that “It is in giving that one connects with others, with the world, and with the divine.” Oscar Hammerstein, composer of *Oklahoma!*, *The King & I* and *The Sound of Music* asserted in his essay that “it is important for a man to announce that he is happy even though such an announcement is less dramatic and entertaining than the cries of his pessimistic opposite.” A Native American professor at the University of New Mexico began her essay by simply stating “I believe in the sun.” Just to give you an idea of the disparate topics shared here are a few of the first lines:

- I believe in the ingredients of love
- I believe in the power of the unknown
- I believe in the absolute and unlimited liberty of reading
- I believe that a little outrage can go a long way
- I believe in empathy
- I believe in Barbie
- I believe that there is no such thing as too much barbecue
- I believe that there is no job more important than parenting
- I believe in always going to the funeral
- I believe that jazz is the sound of God laughing

As you can see each essay is unique, a singular story to be told, a simple, complex, humorous or poetic doctrine that has helped to guide each author through a complicated world. Perhaps one of my favorites for its simplicity in thesis yet complexity of reason is the essay entitled “Be cool to the pizza delivery dude.” The author, Sarah Adams, has this one philosophy that is guided by four principles. Why should one be cool to the pizza delivery dude?

#1 It is a practice in humility and forgiveness because the pizza dude will always cut her off in traffic and she must learn to practice patience and self-control.

#2 It is a practice in empathy because at some point everyone will hold an unglamorous job in order to earn a paycheck

#3 It is a practice in honor because we must “honor honest work” and not blame the lowly employee for the actions of the CEO.

#4 It is a practice in equality because no matter the job each man is equal and so you must exercise kindness

I love the thoughtfulness of this woman who has taken a stranger in her life and used him to transform her actions and perceptions in order to be a more gracious person.

What core belief do you hold that helps you to have a positive perspective in the world? What belief do you grasp so firmly that it allows you to dip your toe in a sea of doubt, explore the waters and then retreat back to its shore to process what you saw in your moment of searching? What truth can you rely on in the silence as you wait with anticipation or trepidation for the next truth to be disclosed? Start small, then allow your philosophy to grow and expand over time as your life experiences cause you doubt in certain moments and enable you to discover truths in others. Allow your philosophy to have a ripple effect in all that you do in life –allow it to give you the freedom not to know the truth about everything but to actively, intentionally and passionately pursue it nonetheless.

What do I believe? I believe that God has a plan. I believe that God had a plan to mitigate the pain of my parent’s divorce by blessing me with three beautiful stepsisters and two loving stepparents. I believe that my life is richer because my parents are divorced. I believe that God had a plan to use my difficult and trying year abroad in Spain to lead me to teach the language that had hurt me, to rekindle my love for it and to lead me to this caring community. And this community is now my

home. This I believe. I believe that God has a plan for Cuba, a plan to capitalize on my doubt, a plan to nurture and use the inherent goodness that lies in each of you, a plan to use St. Andrew's to help you discover the passion that will incite you to change the world, a plan for what He wants to accomplish through this chapel talk. This I believe. And by returning and settling into this belief that God has a plan after wrestling with my conflicting thoughts on Cuba I have realized that in Cuba there is more than one truth, because like each of the essayists everyone has their own story, has been affected differently by the Cuban Revolution and I am only grateful that they allowed me to listen. The most powerful conversation I had in Cuba ended with a professor from the University of Havana stating "Socialism is love" –now that sounds like the perfect opening for a This I Believe essay that I would devour.

That professor has claimed his belief and lives by it, I have defined mine and trust it unfailingly, but did Pontius Pilate discover his truth? I would like to think so. After he questioned "what is truth?," later on in the story of the Passion in the book of John the Bible states that "Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. Many read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests protested to Pilate, 'Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.' Pilate answered, 'What I have written, I have written.'" I believe that Pilate was beginning to find his truth.