

### Welcome

My favorite show back in high school was the X-Files. I couldn't wait, every week, to see what new weird mystery Agents Mulder and Scully would investigate. One of the big reasons *The X-Files* is still considered a landmark tv show is that it was one of the first shows to do an ongoing storyline. Sure, most episodes were 'monster of the week', stand-alone mysteries. But about a third of the episodes each season told the ongoing story of Fox Mulder's investigation of a government conspiracy to hide the existence of aliens from the US population.

[X-Files poster] Mulder's conviction was embodied in an iconic poster he hung in his basement office, a grainy picture of a UFO with the words "I WANT TO BELIEVE". No one believed Mulder... but *he* believed. He wanted to believe so badly that he dedicated his whole life to pursuing the truth.

I can't help but wonder if Fox Mulder was inspired in part by a landmark study of social psychology published in 1956. A small UFO cult in the Chicago area was founded by a housewife named Dorothy Martin. She used some ideas from Scientology and other pseudoscientific parapsychology to predict that the world was going to end in a great flood on December 21, 1954. Fortunately, Martin and her followers would be rescued by a UFO on December 20th.

The people who followed Martin took this very seriously - they gave away their possessions, said goodbye to their families, etc.

What made this study so interesting was that Dr Festinger, the author of the study, and his peers managed to infiltrate the group. They were able to study what happens when people who buy into a conspiracy theory see hard evidence that their beliefs are false. Because, as you might know, the world was not, in fact, destroyed by a flood in 1954. And, as you might have guessed, Martin and her followers were not spirited away by a UFO either.

What do you think happened next? If you think Martin's followers abandoned her, you'd be wrong. The vast majority of them stayed, continuing to follow. (Martin told them God had been so impressed with their faithfulness he decided to spare them, and not send the UFO.)

Martin's followers, like Fox Mulder, *wanted to believe*. They wanted to believe so badly that, even when the prophecy was proved to be false, they didn't abandon their beliefs.

Sounds crazy, doesn't it?

Except... we live in the new age of conspiracy theories today. From Pizzagate to denying climate change to flat earthers to a cabal of elites running a global child trafficking enterprise, we can't turn around today without finding conspiracy theories. And maybe most troubling of all is that Christians are more likely than any other group to believe and share conspiracy theories.

That ought to disturb us (after all, Jesus called himself the way, the TRUTH and the life).

So today, we're going to talk about truth. As we approach the election, as we're inundated more and more by lies and half truths and distorted perspectives, how do we maintain a priority on truthfulness?

### **Message**

I don't know if you're aware, but there's an election in just under a month. Kidding - I don't know that you can live anywhere in this country right now and not be aware that the election is fast approaching. And the refrain I've heard over and over is, "Wow, I didn't think it could get worse than 2016." We're experiencing this election as one of deep divisions, and as if a global pandemic wasn't enough, we're bearing the stress of a divided nation.

So for the next four weeks leading up to the election, we're exploring how to survive the election. We're going to explore for experiences we all have as we navigate this season. And we're going to ask, "How do we follow Jesus through this season? What does it look like to bear Jesus' image faithfully as we live together in these next couple of months?"

A couple of disclaimers: this is not going to be a partisan series. The Church has never and will never endorse candidates or parties. Politics is about how we live together, and the Church is deeply political - that "love your neighbor the same way you love yourself" command is a political statement because it's about how we live together. But political and partisan are not the same thing. So while we're going to talk in this series about how we navigate the complex world of relationships, we're not going to endorse candidates or parties or tell you how to vote.

Second, this is going to be a series that asks a lot of us. You'll see it today when we dive into the difference between 'kind' and 'nice'. We believe that real relationships are deep relationships. Catalyst doesn't settle for superficial. So we're going to have to get real - with ourselves, with God and with each other.

We started with kindness - how it differs from superficial niceness and draws us instead into deeper, more authentic relationships. Last week, Sonya talked with us about how to grieve well and with one another.

Today is all about truth. In a world of fake news, alternative facts and conspiracy theories, how do we insist on being a people of truth?

Let's start by acknowledging this is something we all struggle with. Who among us hasn't liked, shared or retweeted a story on social media, only to learn later it's not true? Or repeated a headline without reading the article because, if this is a safe place and we can be really honest, it confirmed what I already thought to be true about an issue or candidate? And how many of us (again, being really honest here) find it hard to hear evidence that contradicts what we already believe?

It turns out our brains are hardwired to filter information and privilege information that conforms to ideas we already believe. We *want* to believe. Jay Van Bavel, associate professor of neural science at New York University, wanted to understand our inability to discern real news from fake. He conducted a study that examined over 500,000 tweets on politically charged topics like climate change and gun-control. He found something fascinating: there was a strong correlation between the number of retweets and the number of moral-emotional words in a tweet.

So if a tweet had just strict facts, with no editorializing, it didn't get a lot of traction. But if the tweet included a word like "greed" - a word that implies a moral framework and triggers an emotional response, then it got more action. And the more of those words a tweet had, the more retweets it got. But - and here's the kicker - only by accounts that shared a similar moral framework.

So the more emotionally charged a tweet is, the more likely it is to be bounced around an ideological echo chamber.

In other words, we react to - and share - things that confirm what we already believe. For Van Bavel, this wasn't an accident. We were created to belong - it's our most deeply-seated desire. And the way we think about politics is tied directly to that - how we live together, how we *belong together*, is a political question. So our beliefs about politics are really beliefs about our identity.

Which means we get really, really protective of them. We tend to embrace ideas and facts that support and confirm our beliefs. And we tend to dismiss ideas and facts that challenge our beliefs.

Whew. That's hard to admit. If there's any consolation, maybe it's that this is a deeply human impulse. Our struggle to be a people of truth is ancient, and we see the same struggle in the people of Scripture.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Ephesians 4. This letter was written to Christians who live in the Greek city of Ephesus. It was a cosmopolitan port city, a crossroads of religions, cultures, philosophies. Everyone had an opinion on what counted as Truth with a capital T.

Sound familiar? The author of Ephesians writes to Christians in this topsy-turvy culture

**We will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church...**

That sounds pretty amazing, especially in this divided, divisive time. We won't be influenced by clever lies. We speak the truth in love. Every day, the way we live in the world makes us more and more like Jesus. In Ephesians, this isn't a passing thought. They go on to insist that this commitment to truthfulness is a hallmark of Jesus-people. It's one thing that marks us out as different from the world around us (the 'Gentiles' in this next bit):

With the Lord's authority I say this: Live no longer as the Gentiles do, for they are hopelessly confused. Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him. They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasure and eagerly practice every kind of impurity.

But that isn't what you learned about Christ. Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.

So stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbors the truth, for we are all parts of the same body. -- Ephesians 4:14-25

Because Jesus has made us new, because we are throwing off our old ways and living in the Spirit, *because of the way God has changed us, let's stop telling lies.*

What does it mean for us to take Ephesians' instructions seriously in the age of fake news and conspiracy theories? First, we need to acknowledge that we're doing a *bad* job right now. Christians are more likely than any other group to believe and share conspiracy theories. We're as partisan, and as likely to share fake news and unverified stories as anyone else.

In other words, far from different. We're just like the Gentiles of our day, if not worse.

When we discern that gap between who we are and who God calls us to be in Jesus, our first movement is to repentance. We lay down our defenses and say, "God, this is us. We're sorry. Make us more like Jesus."

Then we have to ask some serious, practical questions. Discerning truth from fake news is a question of Wisdom. There's a proverb that is particularly helpful as we navigate this (actually, Proverbs 18 is filled with gems, but that's going to be your homework this week):

**The first to speak in court sounds right — until the cross-examination begins. -- Proverbs 18:17**

We have a modern version of this proverb: there're two sides to every story. But here's the problem - because our brains are hardwired for belonging, we tend to give credence to stories and ideas that support our identity (whether it's political, religious or whatever).

We don't have any problem treating stories and ideas with suspicion - as long as they contradict what we already believe.

We have it backwards. So, if we're serious about being a people of truth in the age of fake news and alternative facts, we need to embrace a practice:

Treat stories that confirm what we already think with suspicion. We need to quit giving ourselves the benefit of the doubt.

This is a commitment to intellectual humility. It's an acknowledgement that we're flawed and vulnerable, that we build our identities around things - like political ideologies. Ideologies subtly become idols, drawing us away from God, making us more and more like the rest of the world and less and less like Jesus.

So it's not that we quit treating the things that challenge us with suspicion - as though they're true just because they're new information. It's that we quit giving ourselves the benefit of the doubt. We introduce a practice that helps us acknowledge that our need to belong can actually short-circuit our ability to love God with all our minds.

But here's the good news: When we all do this together, we can become a whole church that takes truth seriously. That's actually the vision in Ephesians. Just before the passage we read, the author said this:

These are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love... -- Ephesians 4:11-15

This pursuit of truth isn't something we do alone. This is a collective effort, something we do together as a congregation. God has blessed us with prophets and evangelists and pastors and teachers who help us learn to discern truth, separate truth from fake news.

I need you to help me learn truth. And you need me. God created us to belong, and we need to belong to each other to learn truth.

When Dr. Festinger published his report about that UFO cult he infiltrated, the one that, even after their doomsday prophecy didn't happen, refused to abandon their beliefs, he sought to answer the question, "Why?" Why did these people cling so tightly to beliefs that were obviously false?

One of his big conclusions was that these individuals had invested a *lot* in their false beliefs. They had given up homes, money, possessions. Another was that they had *support*. They had each other. To reinforce their false beliefs.

Friends, this is the danger of idolatry. Idols ask more and more and more of us. And the more we give, the harder it is to turn away. Echo chambers keep us trapped under the idol's sway. God's solution is a church of truth-loving people who are committed to speaking truth in love, committed to refusing to lie, twist the truth or misrepresent those with whom we disagree.

Because we know that's who Jesus is. That's how Jesus is present in this world. And that's how we show the world who Jesus is.

### **Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us all to the same table

1. When in the last week have I treated my own convictions and beliefs with appropriate suspicion?
2. When have I been guilty of sharing false information or ideas because they confirmed my beliefs?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to rush to share before I verify?
4. How can I commit to being a person of truth this week?

### **Assignment + Blessing**

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