

Witnesses to the Truth

Deut. 19: 15-21; Lev. 24: 10-23; Matt 5: 33-48; Acts 1: 7-9

Sermon by Jonathan Neufeld

June 30, 2013

Up until June of 2010 there had been 20 perfect games in the recorded history of major league baseball. A perfect game is one in which no runner from the opposing team reaches first base safely. Every opposing batter is retired—27 outs in a row. Up until June of 2010, only twenty pitchers in major league history had ever done that. On June 2, 2010, Armando Galarraga of the Detroit Tigers was about to become the twentyfirst. He had retired 26 Cleveland Indians in a row. And the whole team had done it together. Galarraga's pitching had certainly been brilliant, but he had logged only 3 strikeouts. Twenty-three batters had hit the ball, but consistent play on the part of the infield, and at least one remarkable outfield play, had kept every batter from reaching first base.

The twenty-seventh batter was Jason Donald. He hit a slow bouncing grounder to the right side of the infield. Miguel Cabrera, the Detroit first basemen, had to leave first base to field the ball, so Galarraga, the pitcher, had to cover first base in order to make the play. It was a footrace between Galarraga and Donald, the batter, to first. But Galarraga not only had to win, but also to catch the ball that was on its way to first, thrown by Cabrera, in anticipation of Galarraga making it there on time. This is one of the most challenging infield plays a pitcher ever has to make.

Well, it was definitely close. Galarraga raced to first, caught the ball cleanly, and stepped on the bag just milliseconds before Donald's foot hit the base. The instant replay, which you can still see on YouTube, clearly shows all three objects: the ball and the feet of both players, arriving at first base nearly simultaneously, with Galarraga's catch and his foot just inching out the sprinting Donald. But that's not how first base umpire Jim Joyce saw it. He called Donald safe, ending Galarraga's (and Detroit's) quest for perfection one batter short.

There was a moment of shock, and probably a little twinge of pain on the part of several of the players, then it was back to work. Galarraga's first job, of course, was to maintain his focus until the game was over. The next batter, Trevor Crowe, grounded out to the third baseman, ending the game. Some people call it “the 28-out perfect game.”

Now a person might ask, What “really” happened that day? Was Donald “really” out? There is physical evidence (the video) that the throw beat him to the bag. But there is other evidence, call it “social” or “historical” that suggests that Donald was actually safe. The game continued. Donald remained on first base. The players went back to their positions and the next pitch was thrown—all evidence that Donald was safe. Was Donald really out or was he really safe? I guess it depends on what you mean by “really”. And at times, our socially constructed reality trumps physical

reality, and it does it through the power of our witness, how we experience and communicate the realities of our lives.

We are all witnesses. That was a slogan of the National Basketball Association in 2007. Why not just say, "We all watch basketball"? It was meant to inspire reverence and emotion among fans—an indication that something special, something worthy of being "witnessed" (as opposed to just being watched), was happening in professional basketball. When we witness something, we take it in as a complete experience: intellectually, emotionally, socially. We engage in its meaning, and help create that meaning.

Many people witnessed Galarraga's and Detroit's quest for the perfect game. The players on both teams, of course; the fans, the millions who witnessed the replay on TV and YouTube. Jim Joyce was a witness, too, and his version ended up being true. In Joyce's experience, Donald beat the throw; he was safe; the call was made; the game continued. History turned on Jim Joyce's witness.

As you heard in that somewhat unusual mix of scriptures this morning, both Moses and Jesus took witnessing seriously, and recognized the fallibility of witnesses.

My point in choosing those passages was to present a little taste of the idea of witness from several scriptural perspectives, including the legal, moral, and personal. I hope to touch on or draw upon each of those to some extent this morning.

The law of Moses insisted that important matters be confirmed by the testimony of at least 2 and preferably 3 witnesses. As you heard in the passage, the implications could be quite serious. I think Moses had no illusions regarding human frailty. Even so, he might have been surprised to find out just how fallible we all are as witnesses.

Many studies have been conducted on human memory and our propensity to erroneously remember events and details that did or did not occur. Elizabeth Loftus is one of the key researchers in this area. In one of her most famous studies, subjects were shown a slide of a car at an intersection with either a yield sign or a stop sign. After being shown the pictures, experimenters asked participants questions, falsely introducing the terms "stop sign" or "yield sign" into the questions instead of referring to the sign participants had actually seen. Afterwards, subjects frequently remembered, sometimes with a great deal of confidence, having seen the sign that in fact they did not see. The form and content of the questions had become part of their recollections, though they didn't realize it. In another experiment, subjects viewed a slide showing a car accident. Later, some were asked to estimate how fast the cars in the picture had been traveling when they "hit" each other, while others were asked to guess how fast the cars had been traveling when they "smashed into" each other. They were also asked to remember if there had been any broken glass on the ground. Those who were questioned using the word "smashed" estimated higher average speeds and were more likely to report having seen broken glass in the original slide, though there was none.

The introduction of false cues had altered the participants' memories. But distortions in memory don't just happen due to the influence of meddling questioners. Witnesses can distort their own memories without the help of examiners, experimenters, psychologists, police officers, lawyers, teachers, mothers, spouses, deacons, or anyone else. The process of interpreting events starts at the very formation of a memory, at our first exposure to reality.

As it turns out, we are much better at seeing what we expect to see and reporting what we expect to report than we are at seeing and remembering what actually happens. Details that fit in with what we expect are easier to remember, while details that differ from our expectation (but not by too much) fade quickly, or are never even perceived in the first place. Bias creeps into memory without our knowledge, without our awareness.

While confidence and accuracy are generally correlated, it is not at all difficult to construct (or encounter) a situation in which witness confidence is higher for the incorrect information than for the correct information.

Then there is the influence of bystanders. People who witness actual events and then overhear others talking about what they saw are as likely to incorporate details they overhear as they are to include elements from their own real memories in their recounting of the story. In one very famous experiment, people who had witnessed a real, historical plane crash were asked about the crash 10 months later and heard other witnesses talk about it, too. The group of witnesses was asked about and discussed many details that some did not originally see or report, like "When did the flames actually start?" and "When did the explosion happen?" Through the process, the witnesses' stories converged in subtle (but somewhat anticipated) ways. By the end of the experiment, 55% of the witnesses reported having viewed video footage of the crash on television, though this was impossible, since no video of the incident had ever existed, let alone been shown on TV.

Even our own actions distort our memories. Rarely do we tell a story without a purpose, and every act of telling and retelling is tailored to a particular audience and purpose. Some details are emphasized, some glossed over, and all of it presented so as to enhance the purpose of the telling. It's a social event. Each act of telling the story adds another layer of meaning, understanding, embellishment, or interpretation—in a word, distortion—which in turn affects the underlying memory of the event. Every time we recall and re-tell a story, we re-create it in our mind, like building a car out of a Leggo set, but then disassembling it to put it away.. Each time we reassemble it, we modify it a little. We leave some pieces off; we add others, and we make it a little better suited for its purpose. The next time we pull out the parts to do it again, we use the most recent version (the one we remember best) as our starting point. This is why a fish story, which grows with each retelling, can eventually lead the teller to believe it. And this doesn't just happen to fishermen, or your spouse. We all do it; in fact, we can do nothing else.

What's more, we identify strongly with our stories. It's as if the act of making a meaningful story out of a collage of impressions is difficult, and once we happen upon a meaningful story (or in the case of a police lineup, a positive identification of the suspect), the sense of resolution is so powerful that our neurons cling to it fiercely, unwilling to return to a state of being unsure. Once witnesses state facts in a particular way or identify a particular person as someone they recognize, they are unwilling—or even unable, due to the reconstructive nature of memory we just talked about—to reconsider their original impressions. They no longer have access to an “original” memory of the incident. All subsequent recollections are influenced by the new experience of having successfully recalled the story in a particular way or having made a positive identification. Once the mind settles in, it's hard to change it.

Just as an aside, some of you may know about the Innocence Project. It is an organization that searches out people on death row who have been convicted without the use of DNA evidence, but in whose cases DNA evidence exists. In many cases, DNA testing was not available at the time of the trial, or was not pursued for various reasons.

The Innocence Project has been involved in 171 of the 309 exonerations they have documented to date. In about 75% of the cases the group has overturned through the use of DNA testing, there were one or more confident eyewitnesses who identified the perpetrator in court, under oath. Confident eyewitnesses who were in fact wrong.

So maybe the NBA slogan should have been, “We are all rather poor witnesses.” But so we're bad reporters with sketchy memories. But so what? What does it matter to faith?

The points I want to make are these: We tend to think that God's Truth is an independent and comprehensive understanding of the universe and everything in it. That God is looking at the same stuff we are, but seeing it as it really is, in its essence, free from distortion. We're both scientists, looking at Reality, a Reality that exists separate from us, independent of us. That makes God the biggest and best scientist ever. But for me, that's a suspiciously modern understanding of God and Truth that seems to be more about us and what we value as modern scientific folk than it is about God. I don't think God is a big scientist, existing separate from the universe and observing it. At least, I'm willing to explore a different angle. I can't guarantee it's true, or even better, but perhaps there is some value we can find.

I like to think of God's Truth not as some objective reality, but as the sum of all partial human truths (or maybe the product of all partial truths—something greater than the sum of its parts). God's Truth is not equal to any one of its human parts (in fact, by definition it cannot be equal to any one of them), but it requires all of them for its existence. It's not one idea of the universe, but the totality of all ideas of the universe. You see, a single Truth (like God's) must be big enough to contain a lot of contradictions. Our lives are full of them, and I doubt God's experience would be somehow less complex than ours.

This way of thinking leads to several implications. First, of course, is that no one of us has access to God's Truth. No news there. Second, however, is that each of us is entrusted with an essential part of God's Truth. God's Truth isn't available regardless of whether you show up or not. Without you, without each one of us, the Truth of God is incomplete. This isn't just about us, either. We can extend it out as far as we have the courage to go. Even unto the ends of the earth. All of God's Truth only exists in all of God's people, together.

Now I would also suggest that each of us can bring higher or lower quality versions of our truth to God and the community, and bringing the highest quality version of my truth to God is my responsibility in the world. That's the parable of the talents, that I would love to elaborate on at another time. And one final implication is that I don't know your truth and cannot express your truth—only you can. I can help, I can come alongside, I can encourage, but only you can know it and express it. And it is different than mine.

So we can't know big T Truth very well. But we at least have a chance to know our own truth, and it's our responsibility to bring that to God, to Christ's body on earth, to the community. Here. Then what?

Well, for one thing, if I want to know God more truly, I must try to know and receive all truths as ours, while committing fully to the truth that has been entrusted to me, as God gives me grace. The dish I bring must be my best, my first fruits, my all.

But I also must recognize that the meal is not my dish. It is not about my dish. It is much bigger than my dish. We can only make it together. You didn't realize that the pot luck was actually a profound theological sacrament, did you?

So our witness is about our unique, idiosyncratic experience of the world, of God, and of each other. When we try to witness Reality, Truth, we do it badly. We have a rather poor view, and we aren't really made to perceive reality anyway. So maybe let's stop witnessing so much to the Truth (out there) and do more witnessing of the truth in here (and here among us). Where we may still make mistakes, of course, but where without us, the story is missing an essential part. Each of us is the only one with access to our own life—God's work through us in the world—and we have the opportunity, the responsibility, to find it, experience it fully, invest it, and contribute it back to God in the community. As a body, we have access to God only insofar as we have access to each other; only insofar as we broaden our tent to include the experiences of all. Not that we all agree on everything, but we join together and “incorporate” (that is, pull together into a body) something connected at a level deeper and more subtle than mere agreement.

Also, I want us to consider that what God experiences as Truth is not objective Reality, but subjective Totality. In other words, God experiences the Totality of our experiences, what they are and what they could be. The idea that God is the ultimate scientist who knows everything about us and the universe as objects is a very “modern” idea (in a bad way). The totality that God

experiences, the Truth, is not the exact physical properties of each star in the universe and the exact number of hairs on your head, but the exquisite human agony (the term means “the struggle of a wrestler or contestant in a match”) of each person experiencing the routine joy and suffering of every decade of life. The triumph and beauty, of course, but also the frailty, mistakes, partial successes, and willful ignorance that is so much a part of our heritage. That Truth, the sum total of all of that, is God's Truth. That is what we are witnesses to.

Now think of this: The extent to which we experience our own lives, and believe me, many of us don't experience our own lives very much, to that extent we experience that part of God's truth that has been entrusted to us. But even more exciting, we have in this room a piece of God's Truth that is a hundred times greater than anything any of us can experience alone. A hundred times more of God's Truth, right here in this room.

But of course we need time, a healthy dose of courage, and some appropriate social structures in which to share it. That's why we meet here. But even a hundred times more is only a small part of God's Whole Truth. To get more of it, we need to join with others, know them, experience and accept them.

Incorporate their truth in its uniqueness into ours, or God's. Other groups around the world are experiencing parts of God's Truth as well. We need to keep seeking them, finding them, joining them, and exchanging Truth. Now, I would like us to consider (I suppose you should say “imagine”), as an exercise, the Detroit-Cleveland game on June 2, 2010 from God's perspective, as we have been discussing it. Perhaps in doing this, we can finally answer the question of what really happened on that play.

Imagine God experiencing Armando Galarraga's intense focus and consistency, the growing thrill and anticipation of the whole team as they strained to sustain their perfect performance; but also the determination of Cleveland to break Detroit's perfect performance, to spoil it, to upset their drive for perfection. Imagine God experiencing each batter's hope that he would be the one to disrupt the string of consecutive outs and make it to first base safely, while also feeling Galarraga's fierceness, and Detroit's commitment to keeping the bases clear. Imagine experiencing the crush of pressure, and Jason Donald's desperate passion to make contact, to put the ball in play, and his drive to outrun the throw and the stride of Galarraga. Then imagine God experiencing the view of the umpires, of Jim Joyce and the others, trying to stay dispassionate, objective, professional, but recognizing the growing chance that they also were participating in something historical. Their sense of responsibility to get every call exactly right, to not let their human imperfections influence the game one way or the other. To ignore the growing tension, keep their minds clear, and tell the truth, to call it as they see it. I won't even mention the perspectives of everyone in the crowd, and their experiences, from intense emotion to indifference, anguish to boredom.

Imagine the huge convulsion of emotion that swept over the stadium just as that play occurred. The shock, grief, relief, exhilaration, despair, neurotic repression. What a range! All experienced

by our brothers and sisters in the courses of lives like ours. What beauty, what pain! All of it part of God's good Truth. All of it accepted and held by God as good and real and true.

In the vastness of all that Truth, far down on the field, there's the crack of a bat. The first baseman lunges to field the ball and the pitcher dashes to first base, trying to simultaneously catch the ball and step on the base. And the batter sprints down the first base line in a desperate effort to beat him there. An umpire focuses intently on the scene, trying to discern the most important pieces as the experience rushes by. The weight of the game pivots on this moment. We are all witnesses to the Truth.