



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -  
March 4, 2018 Sermon

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## You Can't Pray a Lie

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 51: 1-2, 6-12; John 8:25-31

You can't pray a lie—I found that out—Huck Finn, in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*  
Then Jesus said . . . "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."—John 8:31

It's a classic, one of the oldest and most famous philosophical questions, yet it started out as a joke, or more accurately, a ruse, a dodge, employed by a flummoxed student because he couldn't answer the question at hand.

It's not that Meno—that's the flummoxed student's name—is stupid. He has more than enough native wit. It's just that he's arrogant: he thinks he already knows everything. So when Socrates asks the question, "What is virtue?," in other words, "What makes for a good life and a good person?," Meno of course thinks he knows the answer. But every time Meno proposes an answer, Socrates asks a question about it, and then another, and then another, and . . . well, pretty soon Meno is flummoxed again. (At one point, Meno declares that virtue is "Having a taste for the finest things in life, Socrates, and having the power to acquire them," which goes to show that they had yuppies in ancient Greece, too.)

After Meno's fourth answer falls flat, and with Meno's frustration obviously mounting, Socrates offers his own proposal: "Well, Meno, I certainly don't know what virtue is. And you . . . well, maybe you *once* knew but have just forgotten, but in any case . . . why don't we look for it together . . . you know, as friends?"

But Meno's not having any of this, so he pulls out his ruse, his dodge:  
*How can we search for virtue, Socrates, or for anything else for that matter? If we know it, well, we already know it, so there's no reason to search for it. An if we don't know it, we wouldn't recognize it, even if we chanced upon it. So why bother?—it's useless!*

The question has become so famous that it has its own name—Meno's paradox—and like many a paradox, this one can point us to a deeper understanding of things, even to a mystery. Socrates certainly treats it that way:

*I learned this from wise men and women, Meno, well-versed in divine matters: they say that the soul is immortal, and that all truth lies buried, forgotten and latent, in our souls, and that all we need do is remember it. So there's a sense in which we both know and don't know, Meno, and what we call learning is really nothing but remembering.*

"Aw, man, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard in my life." This from the sophomore sprawled in the back row with the baseball cap pulled low over his eyes.

"Would you care to elaborate on that, Brendon?"

Well, you know, like . . . like you know . . . like there's stuff . . . like stuff in the world and stuff. You know, like facts. You don't remember facts buried in your soul, you gotta go out, you know, and look.

"So knowledge is nothing more than the indiscriminate collecting and reciting of facts, Brendon?"

“Well . . . no, I guess not.”

“So what *is* knowledge, Brendon?”

“Awwwww Man . . .”

Eventually—I can’t play Socrates forever—I come to Brendon’s aid, and suggest that there may really be something mysterious—maybe even miraculous—going on here—that is, in the ordinary, everyday act of learning. Think of how it was for me in geometry class: I could stare at those figures and diagrams—all the facts—for hours; memorize the definitions and axioms—all the facts—to the end of time, but I still didn’t get it. And then one day, the light bulb goes on, and I see it, maybe too late to get an A for the semester, but still I see it, or at least I begin to see it, and it really is exciting.

If you don’t want to talk about an immortal soul and if you don’t want to say that it “remembers,” if that’s all too mystifying for you, say instead that we have a pre-existing affinity for the truth—that we’re made for—we’re fitted for—the truth. But remember that this pre-existing affinity requires activation, a little nudge, if you will, or in some cases (like Meno’s), maybe even a push.

Now I admit that there’s evidence both pro and con for our having such a pre-existing affinity for the truth.

On the pro side, there’s the high value we place on truth: we want the truth, we demand it, even if it’s difficult, even when it’s painful—we want the truth. All our endeavors, all our study, all our science, everything we are, say, and do—is premised on our seeking, and having some affinity for, some capacity for, the truth. And there is often joy, often great joy, in finding the truth (witness my belated “a-ha moment” in geometry). And if not joy, than at least a certain kind of satisfaction; even in cases where the truth is difficult and painful, there is still a certain kind of satisfaction, albeit grim. We want the truth. From what we are to what others think about us, from what’s going on now to what’s going to happen to us, from our politics to our personal lives—we want the truth. Or at least we say we do.

On the other side, the con side, there’s the seemingly boundless human capacity for delusion, especially self-delusion: we want to believe what we want to believe. It’s not just that we’re ignorant, it’s that we’re willfully ignorant, or at least complicit and (à la Meno) complacent in our ignorance. We don’t want the truth: we want to believe what we want to believe. In everything we are, say, and do—from what we are to what others think about us, from what’s going on to what’s going to happen to us, from our politics to our personal lives—we want to believe what we want to believe and will ignore all the facts to the contrary, or at least discount them and explain them away with remarkable ingenuity, whenever it’s convenient to do so.

Of course, that’s what other people do—I myself am one of the few, notable exceptions: I never delude myself—never have, not once. Nonetheless, it is an undeniable fact that people in general—though not me, mind you—have a boundless capacity for self-delusion.

It’s a paradox. We’re a paradox, with our simultaneous affinity for the truth and willful aversion to it. But like many a paradox, this one can point us to a deeper understanding of things, even to a mystery, namely, this, that God wants us to know the truth and to live in the truth. The Psalmist says to God “You desire truth in my inward being”; and then prays to God, “therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.” And of all the remarkable promises Jesus makes to his followers, perhaps the most remarkable is this one: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.”

And so God activates our pre-existing affinity for the truth, perhaps with a little nudge, perhaps with a little more than a nudge. And God does this, especially when we face a moment of truth, a moment of decision, of crisis. Which is why, I think, we need to pray, especially in our moments of truth. In fact, one way to define prayer, I think, is truthfulness before God. In other words, you can’t pray a lie—just ask Huck Finn.

That’s Huck Finn, as in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain perhaps the greatest of all Ameri-

can novels, and its greatest chapter beyond all doubt being Chapter 31, the one titled, "You Can't Pray a Lie."

To set the scene: Huck, the runaway 13-year-old boy, and Jim, the runaway middle-aged slave, have been floating down the Mississippi River on a raft together, having all kinds of adventures (hence the title) together, adventures at once harrowing, hilarious, and heartbreaking. But remember this is *pre*-Civil War America, and Huck and Jim are floating *down* the Mississippi, and the Fugitive Slave Act is in effect, requiring that all runaway slaves be returned to their masters, for which return there was often a substantial reward. So Huck and Jim have been running the raft mostly at night, laying up during the day; and in the process, Huck has told more than his share of lies—he calls them "stretchers"—to protect Jim from those making inquiries. All the while, Huck's conscience—or what he believes to be his conscience—has been, in Huck's words, "a-grinding" him.

You see, Huck has grown up in the pre-Civil War south, and he's been taught that helping a slave run away is wrong, about the worst thing you can do, and he's been taught that in Sunday School, too. In fact, he's been taught there that God will punish those who help slaves run away, that God will send them straight to . . . anyway, this is Huck's moment of truth.

Jim has been recaptured—sold out by a couple of scoundrels for a quick advance on the reward money, and now he's being held on a nearby farm until his owner can be identified and contacted. So Huck sits on the raft—it's tied up on shore—alone, without Jim. He cries for a while, and then he tries to think. This is his moment of truth: what's he going to do?

He knows what he's supposed to do: he's supposed to write a letter back home, telling Miss Watson, Jim's owner, where Jim is. But then . . . well, what will happen when word gets out—and it will—that he, Huck Finn, helped a slave run away? They'll call him a dirty, low-down abolitionist, and he'll have to get down and lick people's boots for the shame of it. But that's not the worst of it. Oh, no. He goes on:

*The more I studied about this, the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, showing me there's One that's always on the lookout, and ain't agoing to allow no such miserable doings to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared.*

*Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself, by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, "There was the Sunday school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I'd been acting about that runaway slave goes to everlasting fire.*

And so, with the prospect of hellfire before him, Huck decides that this would a good time to pray:

*It made me shiver. And I about made up my mind to pray; and see if I couldn't try to quit being the kind of a boy I was, and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come. Why wouldn't they? It warn't no use to try and hide it from Him. Nor from me, neither. I knowed very well why they wouldn't come. It was because my heart warn't right; it was because I warn't square; it was because I was playing double. I was letting on to give up sin, but away inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth say I would do the right thing and the clean thing, and go and write to Jim's owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie—and He knowed it. You can't pray a lie—I found that out.*

So what to do? Stuck—stuck between the prospect of hellfire and a complete inability to pray—Huck stalls for time—seeing if he can appease both God and himself by writing the letter, and **then** maybe he can pray. So Huck picks up a pencil and paper:

*Miss Watson your runaway slave, Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send. HUCK FINN*

And for a while Huck feels good, all clean of sin for the first time in his life. And he's sure he can pray now. But oddly enough, surprisingly enough, he doesn't. Instead, he sits there, paper in hand, thinking, remembering. He remembers all the adventures, all the times—all the good times—he and Jim had floating down the river:

*I got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time; in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he always was when I come back to the raft and how he'd do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him from the men in the canoe by telling them we had smallpox on the raft, and he said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.*

It is Huck's moment of truth:

*It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: "All right, then, I'll go to hell"—and tore it up.*

Greater love hath no man than this (as the old King James version puts it) to lay down his life for his friend. Of course, he's not a man, only a boy, thirteen years old, abused, orphaned, barely literate, who's spent most of his life unloved, living by his wits. But something happened on that raft, amidst all the adventures, something happened: beauty, joy, and peace—freedom, friendship and love—that's what happened on that raft. That's what Huck remembers as he sits alone, holding that piece of paper. That's what he remembers.

I learned this from wise men and women well-versed in divine matters: they say that the soul is immortal, and that all truth lies buried, forgotten and latent, in our souls, and that all we need do is remember it.

So to the consternation of every preacher on the sawdust trail who's ever issued an altar call, ever spoke of the hour of decision, Huck chooses hell. *Or does he?* He goes off to Phelps's farm, on a day all still and Sunday-like, with a clear conscience: the conscience that had just before been a-grinding him, now not bothering him one bit. He's determined to help Jim get his freedom again, although he has no idea how:

*I went right along, not fixing up any particular plan, but just trusting to Providence to put the right words in my mouth when the time come; for I'd noticed that Providence always did put the right words in my mouth, if I left it alone.*

This of course was the same Providence that was just before slapping Huck in the face for helping Jim run away; *now* that same Providence will help him to set Jim free again. Only it's **not** the same Providence. Just as Huck's false conscience has been replaced by his true one, so the false God of Huck's Sunday school, the idol whom we manufacture to enforce the prejudices of the status quo, has been replaced by the living and loving God, the God of truth. Whether Huck knew it or not, he did pray that day on the raft. He got the nudge. All he need do, all we need do, is remember this: God wants us to know the truth and to live in the truth; and you can't pray a lie; prayer is truthfulness before God.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.