

The Preservation of the Truth
John 14: 5 -17
First Presbyterian Church
Brunswick, GA
August 16, 2009

Thursday night had not been a good night and Friday morning was no better. Jesus stands before Pilate who has asked about his kingdom. Jesus answers, *“You say I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”* Then Pilate asks the question he is remembered for, *“What is Truth?”* This morning we continue our series on The great Ends of the Church as we deal with The Preservation of the Truth.

Our Gospel Lesson this morning flashes back to earlier on Thursday evening at table for what was to be their last supper. Judas has left to do his deed and Jesus is trying to prepare the disciples for the coming events, his leaving them and for their being with him where he is going to go. He tells them they know the way. Listen now for God’s word from the Gospel According to John, **chapter 14: 5-17.** *Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’*

Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. This is the word of the Lord.

“What is truth?” Pilate asks this question and Jesus remains silent. Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian Minister and noted author, in a sermon entitled *The Truth of Stories* says “Jesus answers in a silence that is overwhelming in its eloquence. In case there should be any question as to what that silence meant, on another occasion Jesus put it into words for his disciple Thomas. “I”, he said, “I am the truth.”

Before further exploration of this amazing revelation, a quick word about Thomas and Phillip is perhaps overdue. Thank goodness for the questions of these two because they are indeed the questions we ourselves ask. Thomas has been tagged because of his questioning with an adjective for two thousand years, doubting Thomas. Phillip escapes that fate, perhaps because he saw Jesus before Thomas after the resurrection, but his quest for concrete answers is certainly equal to Thomas in our gospel lesson today. Alfred Lord Tennyson has written, “There lives more faith in honest doubt. Believe me than in half the creeds.” Thomas and Phillip are trying to understand and I believe their seeking brings a wisp of enlightenment to them and to us.

So what is Truth? In the rock opera, Jesus Christ Superstar, you may remember Andrew Lloyd Weber has Pilate add a contemporary twist after asking his question. He says, “We both have truths. Are mine the same as yours?”

Joseph Small, Coordinator of the office of Theology and Worship in our denomination writes, “Our North American culture today assumes there is no true social or moral order, or that there are many different, but equally true social and moral orders.” Individual choice has become the value system of our day and truth is left to the individual decide. This individual choice has spilled over into the church.

Small continues, “The contemporary church is no longer a community of shared certainty in commonly acknowledged truths. We live in a pluralistic world and make way for a wide variety of preferences, opinions, convictions and beliefs. Many people within the church simply assume that theological and moral truths are different for different Christians.” Small goes on to tell the story of a national conference of a major denominational church where a worship team was planning the opening worship service. When the idea of reciting one of the creeds after the sermon was brought up, one team member suggested that it be recited slowly so as to allow people to stand or sit for the parts they agreed or disagreed with. In case you think this is a far fetched

example, just this week I received a request from one of our Savannah Presbytery churches to delete a phrase from the Apostles' Creed in their worship service. These silly examples amplify where the church finds itself in our time. Individual decisions about what is truth, without regard for our connection with saints past and present, are tragic in their denial of what our Christian tradition has said and acted out throughout the ages and into this day. This kind of thinking is rationalized by our saying, **“God alone is Lord of the conscience.”** What is forgotten is we also say in our historic principles, **“No opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level and represents it as of no consequence what a man's opinions are.”**

This certainly is not to condone a rigid fundamentalism which is the opposite extreme in our culture! Jesus' statement, **“No one comes to the Father except through me,”** has, I submit, been misunderstood and misused to the detriment of Christianity throughout history. However, it had a tremendous significance for the people of the early church to whom John is speaking, and may have a word to say to us in our pluralistic and rationalizing society. That early group understood its distinctiveness, not in arrogance and moral superiority over others, but in its confession and commitment to Jesus as the way to the Father. Perhaps the answer to our identity as Christians and as The Church is not whether people outside the church are saved, but whether those of us inside have a sense of our distinctiveness that allows for our commitment to the Truth.

What is that Truth? Jesus Christ is that Truth!! Small puts it this way, “The paramount truth in our world is not a fact, a doctrine, or a private belief. The Truth is a person, Jesus Christ, who is God with us and for us. The whole of the New Testament joins John's Gospel in proclaiming that The Truth, Jesus Christ, is the truth about God, the truth about us, the truth about the relationship between God and us, and the truth about life among us. The testimony of Scripture is affirmed by two millennia of Christian tradition, from Nicaea to Barmen and beyond. What is Truth? Jesus Christ is truth, and that truth is the way, and that truth is life!”

Jesus, in his silence before Pilate, is saying the Truth cannot be explained in words. Buechner says that is why he spoke in parables. He adds, “It is a truth that can never be put into words because no words can contain it.” So Jesus tells us stories that make us think and struggle and use our minds. He bids us to look with our eyes at him and see God; look at the way he lived,

look at the way and whom he loved, look at how and whom he chose to suffer and die for. Look at how He conquered even death and is Alive here and now! He says, **“You have seen me, you have seen the Father.”** Jesus Christ is the Truth!!

So what are we to do with The Truth? The Church of the 21st Century has a purpose to continue into a third millennia of preserving The Truth! As we contemplate this responsibility, we may find ourselves closer to what the early church faced than perhaps what most of us grew up with when our culture was very favorable to the Christian Church. Those early Christians faced a multi-cultural world with many religions and individual beliefs and truths, much like what we are experiencing in today’s world. While we are not actively persecuted, we face many of the same dilemmas as to how to live our faith distinctively with love for all.

Listen to Small once more. “The preservation of the truth is the church’s calling to preserve the good news that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. The church’s primary vocation is not to protect a specific body of dogmatic formulations or to impose rigid tests of doctrinal purity. The church is called to preserve **faith** in the Truth to which Christ bore witness, the Truth that Christ is, and the Spirit of Truth that abides in us. Truth is the shape of our **relationship** with God through Christ in the **power** of the Holy Spirit.” In this statement there are, I believe, three key words that may help us in discovering how we can respond to this call; **faith, relationship and power.**

The church is to preserve **faith** in the Truth. Sometimes our English language prevents us from fully understanding the meaning of what we read in Scripture. The word faith is translated often as, to believe, because we have no verb for the noun faith. In the Greek, however, faith has a much fuller meaning as a verb connoting belief but adding trust and loyalty. Many in our society who attack the biblical account of Jesus’ life and death point to lack of historical facts. This attack is not new and history is full of this search for an historical scholarship theme. Albert Schweitzer, the acclaimed New Testament scholar and humanitarian of the 19th century confronted such a group of intellectuals seeking to make Jesus fit their image. The reality is the writers of the New Testament were not interested in providing a factual history, but rather wrote to encourage faith, to give meaning to Gospel events as John writes, **“So you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through believing you may have life in his name.”** As we, the

Church, seek to preserve the faith in the Truth, our faith believes the Truth of God in Jesus Christ, our faith trusts the Truth of God in Jesus Christ, and our faith remains loyal to the Truth of God in Jesus Christ. Faithing is not passive! Our commitment to our faith is carried out in all of our life's tasks, but this call to preserve the Truth sends a clarion call for us to assemble in this place and places across the globe where the Word, the Truth, is preached and heard and the Sacraments are administered, and where we study and equip ourselves to go into the world, into our community, to show the Good News.

Through understanding the fullness of faith we understand it as being **relational with God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit and with all we come into contact with. Relationship is established through faith as we trust and are loyal to the Truth of God in Jesus Christ. Here my friends is where the action is! Relationships cannot be achieved by words alone, but through deeds. Scripture narrates a story of God with us, not a self contained lone being. The God we encounter in Jesus Christ is characterized by relationships of love through creation; through incarnation, life, death and resurrection and through the nurture of new community with us. God is Love! God's very being consists in loving relationships and is expressed in specific acts of love. The Church is called to actively preserve the Truth of God in Jesus Christ through loving relationships with God and with all God's children!**

I was a member of my home church until my early 30's. The 1960's were turbulent in our country and our church was no exception. The congregation was split over traditional evangelical ministry and social ministries and was filled with strife and discord that separated into sides and isolated members of that church from one another. As one side of that denomination gradually took over many people left that church and other churches across the country. My friends, there is no room for alienation and isolation of any of God's children in this world, and particularly not in God's Church!

I am proud to be a member with you in this loving and caring congregation! We do not always hold the same views on everything, but we attempt to, "speak the truth in love." As was said of the early Christians by their detractors and persecutors, I think it is true of this congregation, "O how they love one another!"

The final word to look at, in the Church's call to preserve the Truth, is **power. This preservation work is a tough calling. Choosing to respond should not be**

taken lightly. Each week in worship we confess our sin for what we have done and not done. If you are like me, that seems to be a frequent need every day, as I am at least partially aware of how I fail to believe, trust and be loyal to God and how my desire to be loving often finds itself in the midst of conflict or apathy.

As a human being, Jesus found true power for living through the Father in him. As he talked that last night with his disciples, eleven confused people who were to be his Church, he made a promise to send a new Advocate, the Spirit of Truth. My friends, we are not alone! John also writes, *“But to all who received him, who faithed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.”*

My brother, Sam, visited recently and we had a wonderful time catching up and telling our stories. During one exchange we agreed that perhaps we should swap our names. We were looking at a picture of our maternal grandfather, Samuel Huntington Templeman, and Sam commented on how much I favored him. Sam is named for him but looks like my Dad’s side of the family. I, on the other hand, am named after my Dad. Many times people know us by whose image we resemble.

May it be said of us by the God of Truth in Jesus Christ. You people of my Church continue to grow up in faith and you look more and more like my eldest Son! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!
AMEN!

Elder Russell Gladding
First Presbyterian Church
Brunswick, Ga.
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