

SERMON
“Truth Calls”
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

Proverbs 8: 1-7

John 16: 12-15

“I still have many things to say to you, **but you cannot bear them now**. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

SERMON

Starting last Sunday, we entered the longest season of the Christian year. This is the second Sunday of the almost six-month season of Pentecost. This long season asks us to consider what it means to be the Church. Most would say that ultimately the work of the Church is the continuation of Jesus' ministry on earth.

Now, if this is indeed true, it would seem a careful scrutinizing of scripture would be in order. We must plow through everything with authority written about Jesus to determine what his ministry was that we are to continue. Well, not according to John's gospel.

Today's gospel tells us that Jesus left his earthly ministry with things still unstated, because the **people were not ready to hear the truth**. Jesus goes on to say that when the *paraclete*, often translated as Advocate, Counselor, Holy Spirit comes, we will be guided in all truth about Jesus. The writer of the Fourth Gospel does not recommend we run to the scripture every time we want to understand the ministry of Jesus that we are to emulate. Instead, he urges us to wait upon the Spirit to guide us. It would seem John would whole heartedly support our denomination's motto that, "God is Still Speaking."

Starting back at the beginning of chapter 14 of John, Jesus began telling the disciples of his imminent departure and about the forthcoming gift of the Holy Spirit. In this final section of the discourse, Jesus is indicating how the Spirit will serve to guide the disciples in the truth. In essence, we are told the Spirit will glorify Jesus and will declare, or teach his followers, what God wants them to know about Jesus.

Now I do not know about you, but going to the scriptures for truth seems easier to me than waiting around on the illusive Spirit that blows where it chooses to show up. Or is it? The words of Jesus as given to us in scripture are open to interpretation—even misinterpretation.

Scholars have argued for years over what sayings are authentically Jesus' and which might have been placed in Jesus' mouth by biographers. Then there is the fact that all the words of the Bible have had to move through many layers of translation, from Aramaic to Greek to English. Any time we translate from one language to another, the subtle meanings of words get lost. So the word of God in written form, carries with it some difficulties at getting at the truth. Interestingly, Jesus never chose to put his teachings in written form.

I told a confirmation class about this once, that Jesus himself had not authored anything in the Bible, and they said, "Really! Has anyone ever told our parents this?"

One thing seems certain to me in all this. Whether waiting upon the illusive, blow-where-it-will Spirit, or trying to discern truth from scripture, getting at the truth-of-the-matter about Jesus is...difficult. Heavens! Getting at the truth of most matters is difficult. Sometimes, truth is difficult to grasp because reality is hard to accept. Or as John has Jesus saying today, "I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." Or as the *New Testament in the Language of Today* puts it, "it would be too much for you now."

Clayton Schmit puts it this way. "We may think we want to know the truth but denial comes into play and makes the world appear rosier than is really the case. Surely it isn't cancer, the patient thinks, when going in for exploratory surgery. Grandma is just getting forgetful, the family thinks at the outset of Alzheimer's disease. Doesn't memory loss happen to everyone sooner or later? There is this scene in the movie *A Few Good Men* that captures the mood of denial. In a courtroom scene the military prosecutor loudly demands from the witness, "I want the truth!"

The witness with fierce contempt bellows back, "You can't handle the truth!"

When I was serving at Austin as a chaplain intern, I discovered that the college psychologist, Obert, and I shared a common interest in Spirituality. Obert had done his doctoral dissertation on “Mystical Experiences.” He approached the subject to prove his theory that people claiming to have mystical experiences were having momentary blips of insanity. What he discovered instead was that people throughout history who have reported having mystical experiences were at the top of the Maslow psychological chart. They were people who achieved self-actualization. Abraham Lincoln, for instance, had mystical experiences. Eleanor Roosevelt is reported to have 2 or 3 said experiences in a day.

His research took place sometime in the seventies when psychedelic drugs were all the rage—or, at least, in certain circles. Anyway, while Obert was doing his research on Mystical Experiences, he became interested in reports about people’s spiritual experiences while flying on a high of drugs. While pursuing this avenue in his research, he came across the people who had mentally flown the coup while flying high. The conclusion he reached in all of this was that when you open yourself to truth through drugs—when you take down the barriers of protection before you are ready—it can blow your mind.

Jesus said, “I still have many things to say you, but you cannot bear them now.” But who can know when truth blows through us like a spirit, if we’re going to be ready to receive it? Some will and some won’t, it seems. According to Obert, the opportunity for an encounter with God’s Spirit is always available. We humans put up barriers, protective walls that keep us from said experiences. And if we take the protective walls down prematurely, we can do ourselves mental damage.

So why do we need these protective walls? From what are we trying to protect ourselves? What do we need to do in order to dismantle our walls...to ready ourselves for the Holy Spirit...the *paraclete*?

In my years of waiting for the Spirit of truth to come, I think I've learned a thing or two. Two books have formed my understanding and countless experiences. One of the books is by Scott Peck, the well-know author of *The Road Less Traveled*. The other is a book by John Powell, one of the most popular spiritual writers of our times. In Peck's lesser known book, *People of the Lie* he struggles with problems of human evil. In this book, Peck refers to the Spirit of truth as the Light of truth.

The first line of the introduction to his book states, "This is a dangerous book. It has potential for harm. I write it because I believe it is needed...but I also write it with trepidation."¹

"In labeling certain human beings as evil, I am making an obviously severely critical value judgment. My Lord said, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.' By this statement—so often quoted out of context—Jesus did not mean we should never judge our neighbor. For he went on to say, "Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.' What he [Jesus] meant," says Peck, was that we should judge others only with great care, and that such carefulness begins with self-judgment."

So I ask of you, if you want to ready yourself for the Spirit of truth, the Light of truth to guide you—then what I am about to tell you needs to be applied first and foremost to yourself. Even if you really, really, really want to ready someone else, chances are you can't...and even if you could, you must start with yourself.

¹ M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*, p.9

There are people in our world who present themselves as upstanding “solid citizens”—but the self they present...is a lie. They are utterly dedicated to preserving this self-image of perfection; they are unceasingly engaged in the effort to maintain the appearance of moral purity. They worry about this a great deal. They are acutely sensitive to social norms and what others might think of them. They dress well, go to work on time, pay their taxes, and outwardly seem to live lives that are above reproach. While they seem to lack any motivation to be good, they intensely desire to *appear* good. Their “goodness” is all on a level of pretense. This is why they are “people of the lie.”²

“People of the Lie” deceive others as they also build layer upon layer of self-deception. They will do anything to flee the Light of truth.³ Now this is the extreme of what happens to people hiding behind deception, hiding behind mask and layer upon layer of self-deception. To a lesser degree, could it be that the little deceptions that all of us practice block the Spirit of truth reaching out to us? John Powell in *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* offers up this conversation:

“I am writing a book, to be called *Why Am I Afraid to tell You Who I Am?*”

“Do you want an answer to your question?”

“This is the purpose of the book, to answer the question.”

“But do you want *my answer?*”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“I am afraid to tell you who I am, because if I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am, and it’s all that I have.”

² Ibid., p. 75.

³ Ibid., p. 66.

“This unrehearsed conversation,” says Powell, “reflects something of the imprisoning fears and self-doubt which cripple most of us and keep us from forward movement on the road to maturity, happiness, and true love.”⁴ Could the defenses that we use to protect ourselves from further vulnerability, which are sometimes wisely put in place, be the very things we wrongly use to not risk honest and intense self-communication with even God?

I once asked my spiritual director and teacher, “Why, after all those years of searching for an encounter with God, did God finally showed up when I got angry with God? I’ve told you before about the night I sat in the middle of my king-size bed and railed at God, using the most profane language, and since I’ve told you I won’t bore you with the story again. If some of you were not here when I told the story, those of you who were, please tell them. The fact was, I was angry—and my anger was directed right at God. And I wondered with my spiritual director, why God chose that moment in my life to make God’s self and Spirit of truth known to me. My spiritual director responded, “Maybe it was because you finally got real with God!”

Could it be, could it possibility be...that if we want to ready ourselves for the Spirit of truth, the Light of truth to guide us—we have to stop playing pity games with God and get down to the nitty-gritty of our real feelings, thoughts and motivations—even feelings we think might be offensive to God. We’ve got to get real with God!

⁴ John Powell, *Why am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?*, pp. 9-11.