



University Christian Church – Austin

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Becoming the Truth

Lent 4, b, March 22, 2009

John 3:14-21

There are meant many such passages for most of us, but this is one of them that if asked, we could recited:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,

so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

It has been a mantra of the church of centuries and a great comfort to Christians, especially as a promise for eternal life. Being frank, however, we should also acknowledge that one of reasons we hear it and read it so often is that it is also one of the chief tools in many an evangelist's toolkit to bludgeon recalcitrant unbelievers. The clause, "so that everyone who believes in him may not perish," strongly but sweetly implying every one who does NOT believe in him WILL perish." And that is particularly shameful, since as look over the whole of the Gospel of John, we find an intense interest in finding the Truth, a truth that has little to do with what we would call belief; and a Truth in strange garb, such as we hear at the end of this morning's passage.

21 But those who do what is true [truth] come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

In addition to this morning passage listen to how the concern for Truth is portrayed elsewhere in this Gospel of John....

[And to the religious leaders of his day] Why do you not understand what I say? . . . you are of your father the devil. . . . He [Satan] was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. JOHN 8:43, 44.

Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" JOHN 18:37, 38.

[To Thomas specifically but in hearing of all the Disciples] Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." No one comes to the Father except through me. JOHN 14:6.

And I will pray the Father, and he will give you . . . the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. JOHN 14:16, 17.

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in Him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." JOHN 8:31, 32.

This is a strange and challenging understanding of what Truth is... especially for those of us in and around the University. In Greek thought, which was shared throughout Middle-Eastern culture of Jesus' time, the word Truth, meant uncovering, bringing to light something central, something that has been hidden and which explains. Why, that's what we are about here at the university,

aren't we. We know what real Truth is, don't we? Our understanding grows straight out of Greek philosophical concerns for categorizing some proposition, say, whether the acceleration of a falling book due to gravity is or is not 32 ft./sec. It's measurable, verifiable, and thus True or False. We'll just test it, right?

I find it interesting that it was really to just such a mindset, the Greek/Hellenic inspired way of thinking in the Mediterranean of that day, that the Gospel of John was written. Its goal, as each of the Gospels, was to convince its hearers that in Jesus of Nazareth, now their Christ and Lord, God has revealed a powerful way to the fullest way of living now and then on in another fashion in to eternity.. But, strangely, for such a Greek audience as John's is writing to, we do not find in the Gospel of John a set of propositional Truths to which you may or may not give your assent. Saying one "believes" in our normal use of the word, in Jesus, is pointless.

Instead we find something much more challenging going on here.

Hear Jesus in John 14:6, "I am the Way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me. "

"I am the truth." Come now, how can a person be Truth? A principle, yes, but a person?

The essence of the Good News is that a radical, wonderful New Life is afoot. We see it most clearly in Jesus Christ, but this New Life just begins there. It doesn't end there. This New Life, this witness to the powerful presence of God in the world is intent upon

breaking down the barriers that are
keeping women subservient to men,
keeping the poor subservient to the rich,
keeping the guilty locked into their guilt, and that are
keeping the broken in spirit, immobilized in their pain.

This New Life Jesus Christ embodies and calls us to share in the work of freeing are of these ; requires of those wishing to live in it, a bold participation in the challenges of spreading that Kingdom of God into every aspect of our personal lives and every aspect of our social lives. So Jesus demonstrates the Way for us, but the Truth that scriptures say he IS, a not a set of testable hypotheses. It is a Way of Being in the World, that Christ calls all to share, that we cannot answer with 32 ft. /sec. , or 3.14159. We answer with yes I will follow You, or no I will not. The “believe” that Jesus calls for in John, is not an intellectual assent. It is saying “yes,” joining the community of the faithful, picking up your cross and moving out!

To understand how Jesus could BE the TRUTH let us recognize that Jesus is not the Truth because his teachings are true. Jesus is not Truth because His life was lived in obedience to God.

No, the core claim of Christianity is the reverse. His teachings are true because they flow from the unadulterated, Divine source that Jesus never separated from. The Disciples saw Him return to wilderness & Temple & orchard to pray. And what they sensed was that Jesus and His God were never really apart. Jesus lived a life not in some slavish obedience to God, but because He was not alienated

from his divine ground, He remained in harmony with God, seeing as God would see, feeling as God would feel, embodying God's action and response for all who are willing to see.

But even this, even believing this... is far from enough. For If we think that Truth was forever limited to existing in Jesus Christ and it gets no farther, how Good is that News?

What matters is whether we, ourselves, are becoming the Truth.

Perhaps a story will clarify. Fred Craddock tells the story of his father, who spent years of his life hiding from the God who was seeking him out.ⁱ

“When the pastor used to come from my mother's church to call on him, my father would say, ‘You don't care about me. I know how churches are. You want another pledge, another name, right? Another name, another pledge, isn't that the whole point of church? Get another name, another pledge.’

My nervous mother would run to the kitchen, crying, for fear somebody's feelings would be hurt. When we had an evangelistic campaign the pastor would bring the evangelist, introduce him to my father and then say, ‘Sic him, get him! Sic him, get him!’ My father would always say the same thing. ‘You don't care about me! Another name, another pledge. Another name, another pledge! I know about churches.’

I guess I heard it a thousand times. One time he didn't say it. He was at the Veteran's Hospital. He was down to 74 pounds. They had taken out the throat, put in a metal tube, and said, ‘Mr. Craddock, you should have come earlier. But this cancer is awfully far advanced. We'll give radium, but we don't know.’

I went in to see him. In every window—potted plants and flowers. Everywhere there was a place to set them—potted plants and flowers. Even in that thing that swings out over your bed they put food on, there was a big flower. There was by his bed a stack of get well cards 10 or 15 inches deep. I looked at the cards sprinkled in the flowers. I read the cards beside his bed. And I want to tell you, every card, every blossom, every potted plant from groups, Sunday School classes, women’s groups, youth groups, men’s bible class, of my mother’s church—every one of them. My father saw me reading them. He could not speak, but he took a Kleenex box and wrote something on the side from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. . . . He wrote on the side, ‘In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.’ I said, ‘What is your story, Daddy?’ And he wrote, ‘I was wrong.’”

I don’t know how long Daddy Craddock lived on earth after that day, but his heart was broken open,. And we know how that always ends, don’t we? Good News. Amen.

ⁱ <http://74.125.93.104/search?q=cache:EuVnnwX6XrYJ:www.stlukeselca.org/sermons/Lent%25204B%2520-%2520March%252022%252009-lowercase%2520 2 .pdf+Serpents,+Penguins,+and+Crosses&cd=8&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>