

“The Truth Will Make You Free”
John 16:7-15; Proverbs 31:10-31

It was the summer of 1976, America’s bicentennial. Jean and I had begun dating in February. Whether by luck or divine providence, which is the one I prefer, we both ended up with summer jobs in western Pennsylvania. Jean was working for her presbytery, the Kiskiminetas Presbytery. And I was the boy’s chief counselor at a Salvation Army Camp.

Both of us had finished our second year of seminary, and while my job was chiefly a way to make money to pay for school, Jean’s afforded her the opportunity to obtain experience for pastoral ministry. Therefore, working out of the presbytery office, she served as a chaplain at church camp, worked with Vacation Bible schools, and preached on Sundays, usually at small country congregations who did not possess a full time pastor.

It was to one of these she invited me to attend with her on a muggy Pennsylvania Sunday morning. I don’t recall the name of the church. Whereas, in South Carolina, most small country churches are Baptist, or maybe Methodist, in Pennsylvania they are Presbyterian. There was nothing remarkable about this church. It was out in the middle of nowhere, sitting by itself on a country road. The white clapboard outside gave it a Norman Rockwell appearance set amidst the surrounding trees. At the service that morning were fifty or sixty hearty souls, dressed in their weekly church finery. Everything, the hymns, the liturgy, the atmosphere was much as it is here this morning.

With one exception. When Jean rose to preach, a handful of men and women stood up and left the church as a protest against women clergy.

Now, if you are my age, or older, this story does not shock you. You can remember when the topic of ordaining women was a hot issue for mainline Protestant denominations. Jean and Barb were in that first significant wave of women coming out of seminary. But if you are younger than me, this story is as strange to you as separate drinking fountains for whites and blacks or that someone could be stigmatized for being divorced. Today, over half the students in mainline seminaries are women; there are no separate but equal drinking fountains, bathrooms, or schools; and being divorced does not disqualify you from being a teacher, bride or groom, or church leader. In each of those instances, we do not believe God, or God’s truth, has changed, rather our ability to understand it and accept it.

“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...”

Jesus spoke these words at the Last Supper. It is Thursday evening. He is only hours away from his arrest, and crucifixion on Friday afternoon. So, he takes this opportunity to reveal the future to his disciples, to explain to them that once he is gone, how they are to move forward. And, at the core of this future is the Holy Spirit, the presence of the absent Christ, the part of God that indwells within the

life of every Christian. This morning, as a church and individuals, as we seek to understand our future, let's see how Jesus says God will lead us.

“And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin..., because they do not believe in me...”

In the Gospel According to John, sin is defined as not believing in Jesus. The central need of a human being is to accept that Jesus is Lord, the Son of God. In this gospel, everything hinges on this decision. Rejecting Jesus is a sinful act that produces devastating consequences.

Now, for most of us, this is not how we envision or interpret sin. We think in terms of “thou shalt not...” We define our Christian life by the lines we do not cross. I can remember growing up as a teenager my faith was defined more by abstaining from alcohol, cigarettes and sex than by intellectual belief.

And yet, John reminds us that belief drives actions. What we believe motivates, controls, how we act. And whether or not Jesus sits at the foundation of our belief system determines how we will respond, what we will choose in life. Everything concentrates on our belief in Jesus.

If we believe Jesus is Lord, the Son of God, that means he will occupy the central place in our lives. If we believe that Jesus is God, his words, his instructions, his life become the most important element of our existence. Jesus becomes our creator, our redeemer, our guide.

Whether or not we take Jesus seriously, listen to his words, follow his direction, see him as a person to emulate in every part of our lives, are all determined by whether or not we truly believe Jesus is God. If we believe anything less, that he was a really good guy, or a great moral teacher, or even the perfect example of a human being, none of these inspire us or cause us to give him our life. Jesus then becomes a take it or leave it proposition. We cherry pick the elements of his life and teachings that we like, and leave the rest behind.

Only if we believe Jesus is truly God's Son does every word he uttered, every action he took, every guidance he gave become imperative for our thoughts and our actions. What we decide about Jesus, how we allow the Holy Spirit to speak to our hearts and minds, will determine who we are, what we will become, and what we will accomplish.

In the July 27, 2009 USA Today, comedian Andy Dick was asked what was his favorite death joke. He said, “I don't know if it's my favorite death joke, but it's the newest one I heard. I read it in Charles Grodin's latest book.

A doctor asked one of his patients, “Would you like to know how you are going to die?”

The man said, “No, I would like to know where I am going to die.”

The doctor asked, “Why?”

And the man answered, “Because I just won't go there!”

Do we choose not to completely and totally believe Jesus is the Son of God because we know what it will mean for us if we go there?

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...”

When Jesus left, he sent the Holy Spirit, the part of God that indwells within the life of every Christian. The Spirit speaks to our hearts and minds to convince us Jesus is Lord. But the Spirit also guides us into truth.

Truth is a gift from God. What is true liberates us, guides us, and makes the world a better place. The Christian does not fear the truth, even when it contradicts his strongly held beliefs. Because truth is from God. Our confidence in God, our belief in God’s goodness and desire to save us, help us, causes us to always be in search of truth, because all truth is God’s truth. And this search for truth is a continuous process.

Verse 12: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” We believe God’s truth is eternal and unchanging. Yet, our ability to perceive it, understand it, is a continuing quest to see more clearly, to hear the Holy Spirit speak to us. Jesus doesn’t change, but our ability to understand him does.

A study of church history quickly relates how our interpretation of Christian doctrine, morality, and teaching continues to evolve. It was the Church who provided a scriptural and theological basis for the institution of slavery. But it was also the Church that became the dominant force to speak out against it. The Church declared woman unequal to men, and then through the leading of the Spirit fought to declare the equality of all people regardless of race, sex, creed, or nationality.

This belief in the equality of all humans has led the Christian church to build hospitals, schools and orphanages. It is why you through this Church’s budget underwrite a kindergarten in the Dominican Republic, support doctors at the Embangweni clinic in Malawi, and rebuild girls’ schools in Pakistan.

The Christian Church, and individual Christians do not always get it right at first. But we believe Jesus Christ is a living person who continues to reveal himself through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit reminds us of Jesus’ words and guides us as we interpret them in a new setting.

This is not easy. We often do not hear the Spirit speak to us because we allow culture, prejudices, selfishness and sin to filter the Spirit’s words. The sin within us fights to mangle and confuse Jesus’ teachings about love, forgiveness, generosity, and sacrifice. We struggle to hear the truth in Jesus’ admonition not to gossip, or judge, or hate.

Sadly, we are excruciatingly slow in recognizing God’s truth. But this passage assures our future. God does not abandon us. The gift of the Spirit is the promise of Jesus’ presence, and the guarantee that God’s truth will reveal itself, and will eventually triumph.

The preacher’s five year old daughter noticed that her father always paused and bowed his head for a moment before starting his sermon. One day, she asked him why. “Well, honey,” he began, proud that his daughter was so observant of

his sermons. “I’m asking God to help me preach a good sermon.” The little girl pause, furrowed her brow, and asked, “How come he doesn’t answer your prayer?”

God’s truth is revealed through imperfect vessels, people like you and me. That makes it slow and can seem like God is not listening or answering. Yet, history and our faith remind us that God continues to work within us and speak through us, so that His will is accomplished and His word proclaimed.

“The truth will make you free.”

The gospel writer John quotes these words from Jesus in chapter eight, but he could just as easily have repeated them in our passage. For John, the truth of Jesus sets us free. The truth Jesus spoke in his words and lived in his life are conveyed to us by the Holy Spirit, who appeals to every heart and mind in this room.

Truth is God’s gift to you and me. But we will only see it, feel it, and live it by accepting and believing that Jesus is Lord, the very Son of God sent to save us from our sin, to lead us into lives of grace the truth.

This morning, do you hear the Spirit speaking to you? Do you want to know the truth, the truth that can set your heart and mind free?

On this day in America we honor our mothers for all the wonderful things they do for us. But as mothers, are you performing the most important act of all, seeking to hear and tell your children the truth about Jesus?

Ludwig L. Weaver, Jr.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
May 9, 2010