

**Tell the Truth!**  
**First Christian Church**  
**Topeka, Kansas**  
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**John 16: 12-15**

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

When *the Spirit of truth comes*, he will guide you into all the truth. That seems like such a great plan! It sounds so easy. And yet ... discerning truth ... is not always easy ... is it?

I'm reminded of the story I came across a few years ago. A certain shoe manufacturing company sent two marketing analysts to two separate locations in under developed parts of the world, to determine the feasibility of establishing manufacturing plants and retail outlets. When the first marketing analyst arrived at his destination, he discovered that the people were very primitive, he communicated the following message back to the home office: "Bad news ... he said. These people are so primitive, that don't even wear shoes! Advise against marketing in this area." The second analyst made the same discovery when he came to his planned destination, but the message he sent back to the home office was considerably different. "Good news" ... he said. "Nobody in this place seems to own a pair of shoes! Marketing possibilities are endless. Advise immediate action in establishing distribution in this area."

Which one of those sales representatives was right? I share that story with you this morning ... to make one point. You and I make decisions every day based on perceptions of how we see the world ... how we see ourselves ... how we see everything around us. We struggle day in and day out making crucial decisions for our lives ... hoping that we have discerned the truth of given situations. But the real truth is ... we come at those decisions in our lives ... from vastly different perspectives. So ... for one person ... the barefoot crowd looks hopeless for the shoe industry ... and to another ... it looks like an amazing possibility. And determining which it really is ... can be a laborious exercise in discernment.

"The spirit of truth ... will guide you into all the truth" Jesus said. ... spoken to his disciples on the night before he was to go to the cross. This reading which we heard this morning is an excerpt from Jesus' table talk ... that lengthy exhortation to which the gospel writer ... John ... attributes 5 chapters of his literature. They were words spoken to confused ... bewildered ... followers of Jesus who were still trying to make sense ... out of the things he was saying. But they were having trouble tracking. SO Jesus seems to be saying to them ... be patient. You're not supposed to understand everything right now ... but ... **When *the Spirit of truth comes*, he will guide you into all the truth** Jesus was obviously talking about the Holy Spirit ... which came upon the Disciples on that first Pentecost after the resurrection.

It sounds so simple, doesn't it? When you receive the Holy Spirit ... he will guide you into all the truth.. And yet ... here we are today ... 2000 years later ... and we still struggle to understand exactly what it means to make decisions with our lives that are totally in synch with God's purpose and plan for our lives. You don't have to

look too hard ... to find religious extremists ... who carry signs around ... quoting scripture ... and I'm sure if you asked any of them they would tell you they are simply "telling the truth". But their message does not bear resemblance to truth for most of us. We read the same Bible ... that line about the spirit of truth is in their holy scripture just like it is in mine. How can we come out in such different places? Television preacher Rev. Benny Hinn zaps people on the forehead, curing them instantly of everything from warts to brain tumors. Rev. "Dr." Mike Murdock asks for \$58 of "seed money" to make you "uncommonly wealthy." and says that your money goes "directly to Jesus." Is he telling the truth? No, I don't think so. But he ... and others like him ... have convinced a surprisingly large number of people that prosperity is what discipleship is all about ... His message prompts me to ask ... What is truth? There are radically contrasting messages that are spewing into the world ... and they can't all be based on truth.

So ... what is truth? What is right ... what is wrong? Over the years, the church has had to struggle with that question as we have ministered in the mission field in remote parts of the world. I think of people who have served the church as fraternal workers .... missionaries if you will .... in remote parts of the world. Meeting people who dress radically different .... or who maybe just don't dress at all! People who have very different criteria for measuring right and wrong, .... acceptable and unacceptable. There was a time in our history when we believed that to Christianize people ... meant to Westernize people. Get 'em Tee Shirts and sneakers ... and get tops for the women ... and, you know ... help them to look like us. That just seemed like the *right* thing to do. But really now ... is that what we needed to do? We began to ask ourselves that question.

Stanley Hauerhaus and William Willimon are two contemporary scholars who have convinced me through their writings that any church which seeks to takes its mission seriously ... any person that takes the teachings of Jesus as an ethic for life ... any community that is sensitive to the claim of our Christian tradition ... is going to feel like they are resident aliens. Our world ... our secular communities ... are simply less accommodating to the principles of Christianity than they were 25 years ago. It's just that simple. I can clearly remember as a young person ... you just didn't see people bustling around on Sunday at shopping centers, and Wal-mart stores. ... Part of the reason for that was that I grew up in Polo Missouri ... and we didn't have shopping centers and Wal-Mart stores. But the other reason was because the Christian tradition of honoring the Lord's Day was just accepted. It was a part of our culture. Whether folks went to church or not ... they stopped working and took a rest on Sunday.

Today ... our secular world is not accommodating Christianity. And it is easy for Christians ... in this kind of a setting ... to simply sink in ... to the prevailing values of the world around us ... rather than living by an ethic that stands at odds with many of the prevailing values.

The truth of the matter is ... our corner of the world has gone through significant social transformation.

Clarence Jordon of Cottonpatch Version of the Bible fame tells the wonderful story of the day he visited an integrated church in the Deep South one Sunday morning. It was a relatively large church ... so thoroughly integrated ... not only were there black and white .... but there were some really quite wealthy people, or so it would seem ... along with a number of obviously pretty poor people. So Clarence Jordon asked the seemingly limited educated hillbilly preacher ... "How did you get this church this way?"

"What way?" the preacher asked. Jordon went on to explain his surprise at finding a church so integrated and

in the South, too. The preacher said ... "Well, when our preacher left our little tiny church, I went to the Deacons and said, "I'll be the preacher." And on my first Sunday as preacher, I opened the book and read, 'As many of you as has been baptized into Jesus has put on Jesus and there is no longer any Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, males or females ... because you is all one in Jesus.'

"Then I closed the book and said, "If you one with Jesus, you one with all kinds of folks. And if you ain't, you ain't". Jordon asked what happened after that.

"Well" ..the preacher said ..."the deacons took me into the back room and told me they didn't want to hear that kind of preachin' no more."

"So what did you do?" Jordon asked. "I fired the deacons" ... the preacher said. "Then what happened?"

"Well, I preached that church down to four people!" the preacher said. "But not long after that, it started to grow .... and it just grew and grew and grew. You know what I found out?" the preacher said. "'I found out that revival sometimes don't mean bringin' people in. It means preachin' people out that don't love Jesus."

In other words, that hillbilly preacher was saying .... here in the church ... we don't take our cues from the world. We don't maintain the same prejudices and the same values as the world. We are in the world ... but we are not of it. Because we follow Jesus! It's that simple!

Does it seem to you that you and I are living in a day and time when *truth-telling* ... is a depreciated value in our human discourse? In fields as diverse as science ... politics, entertainment ... and yes, even religion ... truth is just not as easy to come by as it once was. And I don't know about you ... but I feel like sometimes ... I am living in a fog ... and discerning truth ... who is telling the truth? ... seems to get a little more complicated with every passing day.

It seems to me ... that the body of Christ ... should be ... about embodying truth. Jesus said that once ... at the point of his trial before the Roman tribunal in Jerusalem. I don't know if you remember this exchange or not, but according to John's gospel, Pilate said to Jesus ... "So you are a king?" and Jesus replied ... "You say that I am a king. For this I was born ... and for this I came in to the world ... to testify to the *truth*. Everyone who belongs to the truth ... listens to my voice." And Pilate asked Jesus ... "What is truth?"

What is truth?

It is hard not to notice the sheer sense of strength and courage that became a part of the make-up of the Disciples of Jesus Christ as a result of what happened to them on Pentecost day! In that experience, which we read about and pondered last Sunday morning, those Disciples finally understood what Jesus meant when he said ... “I am the way ... I am the truth ... I am the life.”

What is truth?

I will never forget the morning one of my sons got up ... we were living in Chanute at the time, and he was in the early years of elementary school. He came in the room where I was studying, and informed me that he wasn't feeling well. And as a parent, I had to discern truth. What is truth? Is the truth of the matter that you would just really like to go back to bed, and skip school for the day? Or is it true that you really are sick? Noting that I seemed to be struggling for the answer to that question, he left the room for a moment, and then came back with the thermometer, which registered a temperature of 105 degrees! “Good grief”, I said. “You should be in convulsions! We need to get you to the hospital quick ... unless, by chance you might have held the thermometer under the hot water faucet before bringing it in to me.” At which point his head dropped, and he went back to his room and prepared for his day at school. One of the virtues that we parents try to teach our children ... from the earliest days of their lives ... is to be bearers of truth. Truth is the foundation of healthy relationships. It is the foundation of trust. It is the base upon which we build community, democracy, and civility in the world.

And ... I don't know if you would agree with me or not, but it seems to me we are really struggling these days in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, in North America ... with this whole issue of truth!

But think about some of these issues that we face today. Abortion ... should it be outlawed, to protect a fetus, or should a woman have the ultimate right to choose what happens to her body? People of faith are arguing that issue over and over and over again, and I don't think anybody is ever going to change their mind! The issue of sexual orientation is one of those tough issues of our 21<sup>st</sup> century? And the issue of separation of Church and State. That is one that is being wrestled with day after day in the halls of congress. What do you think about the death penalty ... or evolution as opposed to creationism ... or euthanasia? Does anyone have all the answers on these incredibly complex issues that divide people into various persuasions ... even in the church of Jesus Christ? Is Edith Ann around? Is there anyone who can just tell us ... where is the truth?

When talking with his disciples about his mission and his departure from them, Jesus said to his disciples ... “I am the way ... I am the TRUTH ... I am the life.” “You shall know the truth ... and the truth shall set you free.”

It all sounds so simple. Just open the Word of God ... and there you will find truth. Why do people have to make this experience of living life faithful to God so difficult?

But it's not that simple. The truth of the matter is ... Christians today are deeply divided about the *heart* of Christianity. Faith in God is a matter of the heart. It is more than a head trip. And the fact of the matter is that our society is and has been in the midst of a seismic shift ... the kind of shift that takes hundreds of years to be able to understand and reflect on.

So what does all of this say to us? Number 1 ... I think it says, as we seek to make decisions that are reflective of God's call upon our lives ... we are expected to make decisions based on our understanding of the truth which Jesus clearly embodied in his life on earth. And which the Apostles were so convinced of, as is clearly identified in

our passage from Acts this morning. Perhaps Charles Sheldon's question that has become so popularized of late ... really is an appropriate question to ask ourselves as we seek the truth and make decisions about our lives ... and our ethics, and our mission. "What would Jesus do?" And that is not an easy question to answer!

But let me tell you what I believe about all this that rests in me, beyond any shadow of a doubt. I am convinced that our seeking the truth, as it has been revealed in Jesus of Nazareth ... and then TELLING the truth as it has been revealed in Christ ... that combination ... can change the world! And it has changed the world! Remember a decade or so ago when Apartheid was ended in South Africa? All of those repressive, racist laws that governed South Africa were over-thrown ... and it happened as a result of a growing perception of the way that racist government was violating people's lives. The faith community had a lot to do with that struggle and one of the people who came out as a real hero in the dismantling of institutionalized racism in South Africa was Arch Bishop Desmond TuTu. The bottom line is, the truth ... has come out in South Africa. Life in that country is not dependent on Apartheid. The truth has come out, but it wasn't without people paying a great price. The same thing happened in this country back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century ... with our own repressive, apartheid, which justified human slavery. That issue was debated tirelessly in the halls of congress, and I would suspect, in faith communities that were brave enough to be prophetic. And truth won out, and slavery was abolished. Not racism ... it will take generations for racism to be abolished ... but the institution of injustice was abolished.

Living the truth frequently calls us, as the disciples were about to discover, to be in conflict with the world. But as Christians, we are called to seek to know God's truth, and to live by God's word, as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Living the truth ... means ... seeking the truth ... and telling the truth ... and being the truth in the world in which you live. Every day. And listen to this ... this is the bottom line, I believe. When we live the truth ... as it has been revealed to us in Christ ... then, perception by perception ... action by action .... It changes us! And it changes the world around us!

And ... as Edith Ann would say ... that's the truth. SO MAY IT BE.

AMEN.

Sometimes it is hard to discern truth ... hard to find answers ... hard to know how to make the right decision ... both as individuals ... and as the church, if you know what I mean.