

ðThe Spirit of Truthö  
 Acts 17: 22 ó 31                      John 14: 15 ó 21  
 Rev. Wayne E. Gustafson, D.Min.  
 April 27, 2008

In our modern times, times that are characterized by apathy for religion and an apparent erosion of ethical foundations, it is important that we try to be clear on our reasons for being here and for engaging in all these ways that we support the church. So, why do we participate in and join churches? People give many different answers to this question. Some say it is their attempt to do the will of God. Others say they appreciate the sense of community or the opportunity to be of service that the church provides. Still others want to align themselves with ðthe truthö that they believe is preached and acted out in the churches they join and attend.

Of course, any skeptic can respond with the question, ðWhat is the truth?ö

Some people expect the truth to be an absolutely accurate and complete description of how things are. Throughout their times of participation in their churches and in their religious lives, such people are always looking for, and expecting to find, the correct answers to their questions. If only it could work out that way. As I read the New Testament, and particularly the Gospels, I am struck by how few absolutely clear answers there are. The disciples and others who were followers of Jesus asked him many questions. We can tell from the way they formulated their questions that they at least hoped for, if not expected, direct answers. But, when Jesus answered these questions, he most often answered them in the form of parables. Perhaps in this way Jesus offered us a glimpse of the nature of truth. Parables are never simple because they are containers capable of holding and carrying the paradoxes of life. And, by the way, parables never reduce truth to simplistic formulas.

That Jesus was interested in the truth is undeniable. He even refers to the Holy Spirit, whom he says is coming, as ðThe Spirit of Truthö. What does this description mean? Does it mean that when we receive the Holy Spirit we get, as a bonus: the absolutely correct answers that we have been seeking? Some people behave as if they believe that, but I find little evidence that we human beings could understand truth in an absolutely correct manner even if we were to receive it.

What, then, might Jesus mean by his reference to the Holy Spirit as ðThe Spirit of Truthö that we find in our gospel reading today? Well, we have to read ahead a couple of chapters, to John 16: 8 ó 11 to get a hint (even if it is somewhat obscure) in his identification of the mission of this Holy Spirit of Truth.

ðAnd when the Advocate (or the Holy Spirit) comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.ö

Before telling you what I think Jesus is saying here, I want to make a comment about interpretation of scripture. Scripture is alive. It continues to speak throughout the ages to those

who seek its wisdom, but it does not necessarily mean the same thing to each reader. Furthermore, there is not necessarily just one correct reading. There are layers and layers and layers of meaning. And as I have told you before, what you expect it to mean will often restrict the variety of possibilities that can emerge from a faithful reading of the text.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner (well-known as the author of the book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*) has said that one way to see scripture is like a collective dream. It is the distillation of the depth of belief and human experience throughout the ages. It represents the voice and experience of God in the depths of human hearts and human awareness. To the degree that it is a dream, we can believe that it has meaning for us. In psychotherapy, people sometimes ponder the meanings of their dreams as a resource and guide for their healing. Dream interpretation involves looking at all aspects of meaning in the dream because at some level the dream is a communication from God. Therefore, we need to look at it from as many perspectives as we can so we do not get restricted to what we already believe it must mean for us. Those of you who participated in the recent adult class about the Aramaic perspective on the Lord's Prayer have already been practicing this approach to scripture.

I am looking at today's passage in this manner. Many sermons and theological treatises have been written about it, but usually from the same general perspective. It reduces to something like: When the Holy Spirit comes, He (gender intended) will convince all those unbelievers that Jesus really came from God and that they are in great trouble and subject to critical judgment. These words are used to argue that a particular understanding of Christianity is the only way to salvation. After all, The Holy Spirit says so!

For today, let's see what else Jesus might have to say to us through this passage. As I relax into the possible meanings of this passage, open to the variety of messages it might carry, I find that in some ways I agree with the traditional interpretation, but that there seems to be more. Let's look more closely at the three issues Jesus identifies.

He says, the Spirit will prove the world wrong:  
 "Concerning sin, because they do not believe in me" ò

Usually this is understood to mean that the Holy Spirit will "convict us" (to use the jargon of some fundamentalist traditions) of what terrible, unbelieving sinners we are. But what does it say to those who are already immersed in ample guilt and shame in their lives. Perhaps he is saying that they are making too much of the barriers that they fear keep them from God. The good news that Jesus brings, proclaims that God is near, God is love, and that God wants nothing more than to remove whatever barriers separate us in our relationships with one another and with God. So while the passage could mean "You're not taking your sin seriously enough," it could also mean "You're taking your sin, and particularly the sins of others, much too seriously. Those sins don't have the power to stand against the healing power of God's love." Or it could mean both. You have to decide how it applies to you.

Secondly, the Spirit will prove the world wrong:  
 "Concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more" ò

Again, traditionally, Jesus' ascension to God is used as further proof that he was righteous and that those who condemned and crucified him were wrong and even evil. By extension some people think that it is meant to tell people what big trouble they are in if they don't believe in his righteousness. I wonder, though, if Jesus is really referring to a proof of his own righteousness. He doesn't seem very interested in proving anything to anyone. It could be that he is talking about the nature of righteousness itself. I wonder, therefore, if righteousness might actually be relational rather than moralistic. What Jesus demonstrates most clearly is the nature of his relationship with God. It is the relationship that defines right and wrong. It is not so much about doing the "right stuff," but of entering a relationship of love and then doing what comes naturally.

And finally, the Spirit will prove the world wrong:

“Concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged”

Are we so afraid of God that we always expect God's judgment to fall on our heads? Are we so arrogant that we expect that God is about to judge those people we consider to be wrong in their religious beliefs and practices? Jesus says so much in scripture about the dangers of judging, but we continue to develop rationales to support our judgments of others. It is the "ruler of this world" who is judged (and by that we might read: found wanting). So who is this ruler of the world? It is not particularly helpful to name the world's ruler as Satan, the Antichrist, or even particularly powerful humans. (Although, we could find plenty of people who would be qualified for the job.) Still, it is more useful for us to identify the characteristics and forces that affect humanity so much: Greed, impatience, fear, and a reliance on our own accumulation of power stand at the top of the list of world-ruling characteristics.

It appears to me that Jesus is once again reminding us not to judge ourselves and other people too harshly, but, by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit of Truth, to see that greed, impatience, fear, and power can never deliver the foundation of peace and wholeness that we crave. These forces always promise to fix everything, but they never quite deliver what they have promised.

If you hear nothing else today, hear this. Jesus' life and ministry stands as witness and testimony to the power of God's love. Please know that it is the freely given love of God that makes all things possible. And know that no matter what happens, you will not be left alone. Jesus told his disciples that he had to go away, but he sent the Holy Spirit of Truth to them and to us, to comfort, guide, heal, and encourage us to live that promised life of abundance. It is a promise that comes true. You can count on it. Thanks be to God.