

Sunday February 3rd, 2019
4th Sunday after Epiphany

PRAYER: Gracious God, in Jesus Christ you introduced yourself as the help of the hopeless and the hope of the helpless, and you called us to proclaim your name and portray your character. With gladness we heeded your summons. But our enthusiasm has waned, and your mission has suffered. So, we pray, O Lord, for the renewal of our vision of Jesus Christ, that our enthusiasm for his mission might be rekindled and that, once again, the helpless might find hope and the hopeless might find help. Amen.

OFFERTORY SENTENCE: One of the things we often forget or wish we could forget is God's call on us to give the very best of ourselves and our resources to him. God is not to receive our leftovers but is to receive the first gains of all we receive in this life. King Solomon reminds us of this fact when he writes in Proverbs 3:9, "Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops." We should therefore give to God nothing less than our very best.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: Remember that God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. God sent Christ in order to fulfill the law. Now we walk according to the Spirit, who bears witness with our spirit that we are God's children. Friends, claim your legacy; we are forgiven.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious God, our Lord and Saviour, we turn to you in grateful confidence, for you are no stranger to us. Where it not for your initiative to reach us, you could be a stranger. For we find ourselves struggling at times to put distance between you and ourselves, but even when we believe we have succeeded in creating distance you come and reveal your close proximity to us. You just will not let us go, and for this we are eternally grateful. In every aspect of your interactions with us we are reminded at how precious and undeserving your love for us is. In your character we find a power we cannot manipulate, a goodness we cannot match, a love we cannot deny; for this, dear Lord, we bless you and pray for your blessing upon us. So, in these moments of clarity, we ask that your power be not merely an object of awe but a true source of renewal in this church; let your goodness become to us not merely a thing of envy but a model for life; let your love become to us not merely an inescapable force but a contagious presence, that we might remember not only to whom we should give thanks, but why.

We voice this plea, O Lord with hesitation. Not that we doubt your intentions or your ability to accomplish them. We know that before we move in love toward you, you have already moved in love toward us; before we seek you, you have already sought us. Nevertheless, we do hesitate, for we are saddled with memories-vivid memories, bitter memories-of the times we failed to conform our action to your intention: when those in life's quicksand might have been rescued, but we did not extend a helping hand; when the cause of justice might have been advanced, but we did not plead its case; when the obstacles to a healthy environment might have been removed, but we did not lend our strength. We would like to forget: the times when you said to pluck up, and we continued to plant; the times you said to go here, and we went there; the times you said do this, and we did that; the times you said to speak boldly, and we spoke timidly, if at all.

When we review these times, we are astounded, O Lord, that you remain near to hear us and to receive us and to forgive us; that you stand ready, even though we repeatedly make you our second choice, to offer us a second chance. So, we approach

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you in repentance and hope, chastened by your ability to remember, yet encouraged by your readiness to forget.

O God, turn our eyes from our unalterable past to our open future: from the hateful words we have spoken to the healing words we can speak; from the thoughtless deeds we have done to the thoughtful deeds we yet can do; from the worthless causes we have supported to the worthwhile causes we can yet support; from the uncaring society we have shaped to the caring society we yet can shape.

O Lord, the world is full of people we yet can help. Open our eyes, that we might see them; our hearts, that we might love them; our mouths, that we might defend them; and our hand, that we might assist them, as together we seek to discern and do your will, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

BENEDICTION: O Lord, as you have become our refuge from the world's injustice, send us forth into the world to become a refuge for its victims. Let your light so illumine us that they not only might discover the path to peace with justice, but find the courage to make it a wide highway.

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Luke 4:21-30
“A Prophet Without Honour”

There has always been a fine line in many churches that a preacher must sometimes travel, to avoid offending his or her flock, while at the same time speaking the truth. Case in point is a story I read about a new pastor, freshly minted out of seminary, who got his first pastorate in rural Kentucky. For his very first sermon, he prepared a powerful sermon on the evils of gambling, and delivered it superbly.

My reaction to his choice of topic on his first sermon was, “that was an odd choice” but I digress. Anyway, after the service, the head deacon pulled the minister aside to say, “I should warn you, pastor, that many members of our congregation raise horses or grow animal feed that is used in the Kentucky derby and other horse races. Having caught the hint, the young preacher prepared for the next Sunday a powerful sermon on the evils of smoking.

Once again, the head deacon warned the pastor, “I should tell you that many of our members have tobacco farms.” On the minister’s third Sunday, he preached a powerful sermon on the evils of drinking. And once again, the head deacon pronounced a warning: “Pastor, you should know that many of our members have stills in their backyards.” The pastor was frustrated at trying to figure out what subject to preach on without alienating a large portion of his congregation.

He mulled this problem over until late Thursday when he had a revelation. That Sunday he preached a powerful sermon that everyone loved. The subject, you might wonder, was on the evils of fishing in another nation’s territorial waters. This story makes me wonder what subject would get me in trouble with some of you. We are always counseled to “speak the truth in love”, but let us be honest; we really don’t want to hear the truth.

Sure, we like to hear truth on our terms, and when it benefits us, but honestly, I think generally we fear the truth. Nothing makes the heart skip a beat more than for someone we answer to, or are closely related to, who says to us, “We need to talk.” None of us, as children, liked being hauled into the principal’s office, (Even if it was Tom Harvey or John Wallace) or as adults, being summoned to the boss’ office. We would rather “dance around the truth”, than wade fully into it.

We are known to play with the truth as well. We twist it, compromise it, colour it, and stretch it: all until it is hardly recognizable. Perhaps, the very worst thing that has happened to truth, is that we have come to believe that it is all subjective; that whatever one person believes is fine for them, as long as I get to believe what I want. The moment anyone tries to suggest something as a universal, or objective truth, outside of perhaps the laws of physics, someone gets all irate and throws accusations at the one making truth statements.

Seems like a certain political leader and his twitter account.

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The one promoting an objective truth is called, among many things: narrow minded, old fashioned, quaint, bigoted, ill-informed, mentally unhinged, or a whole host of other derogatory labels. I have also noticed, as maybe you have as well, that people seek not truth, but rather, other people whose perception of what is true matches our own.

And when a community's version of the truth is challenged, people hunker down, circle the wagons, and lash out at any and all challengers. It is when people hitch their wagons to the subjectivity, or relativity of truth, that we see conspiracy theories, and revisionist history begin to emerge. For example: Holocaust deniers are convinced there was no holocaust, despite all kinds of evidence that it did occur. Their version of the truth is what matters to them, and what carries the most weight with them.

One of the funniest portrayals of avoiding the truth I can remember, comes from the old CBS TV program *Hogan's Heroes*, about a group of POWs in a German prison camp. One of the guards, Sergeant Shultz, was always seeing the antics of the prisoners, and instead of acting on what he saw, he always repeated his own little mantra of ignorance, "I see nothing. I hear nothing."

The gospel lesson today is a continuation of what we looked at last week. Jesus has read the scripture lesson from Isaiah, and then announced the passage's fulfillment in their sight. It is an incredible passage, talking about Good News for the poor, the release of captives, freedom to the downtrodden, and a time of the Lord's favour. "Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life" as we used to like to sing.

It was a passage that everyone in Jesus home village would like to hear. These words of hope of the Messiah helped everyone cope with the harshness of life. Luke tells us that those who heard him read were amazed at the gracious words that fell from his lips. They wondered how the son of a labourer, could speak the scriptures so clearly, and with conviction. If the passage ended at verse 22, everyone would have gone home happy.

However, the passage in Luke continued, and everyone's positive feelings towards Jesus evaporated. As I mentioned last week, the home town crowd, liked hearing Jesus read this passage, but they wanted more from him. The words he read, and said, were not enough, no matter how true they were. They wanted some of the miracles performed elsewhere in the region, to come cascading down on Nazareth. The people honestly believed Jesus owed them something, because he was after all a boy from Nazareth.

What Jesus says next in reminding them of Elijah and the widow, who was not an Israelite, and Elisha healing Naaman the Syrian, was akin to saying to them, "you do not have a special status with me". Being an Israelite or being from my home town does not give you any greater claim on me or my ministry. We do not have the complete expression of the verbal reaction to his words, but we see the physical reaction.

His own people, probably some of his own distant family members, were furious with him, and took him to the edge of the city by a cliff, and were planning to toss him over to kill him. Harsh, isn't it?

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I can picture this crowd, and if it happened today, I think we might hear things like this: “But Jesus, I helped teach you the Torah, or helped you fix that roof, or looked after your mother” or any number of things.” “Come on Jesus, we are not strangers; we are Israelites, we are from your home town.” Reward us and our connection to you.

It all has to do with expectations. We’ve had this issue come up before, and surely will again. Expectations can make our lives miserable, and yet we still nurture them. We expect things from family, from employers, and yes, even from God. “You owe me!” That’s why we name drop to other people. I know so and so. We do it, because we think it somehow lifts us up in the estimation of others.

In Nazareth they are acting and speaking like they owned Jesus. “You people in those other villages that had miracles performed, well good for you, but we are going to receive even more.” Jesus knew their hearts, because Jesus always knows our hearts. I am sure the people’s response saddened him, but it did not surprise him. “But the truth is, no prophet is accepted in his own hometown.”

A prophet, that is the key word here, is one who speaks for God. The point of this incident is that the real value in Jesus’ visit to Nazareth was in his words. “This scripture has come true today before your very eyes!” Jesus is telling them the importance of the passage from Isaiah and his miracles.

This is what is important, the truth; not the miracles. Jesus is the very embodiment of truth. “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.” Jesus is giving universal, objective truth, but they didn’t even pick up on it. The people only cared about their subjective needs and wants. They only wanted truth as it fit into their own version of the truth. I hear the same question echoing through time. The question is asked by Pilate in John 18:38.

Jesus is being interrogated by the governor Pilate, due to instigation of the religious leaders. Jesus says at one point, “You say that I am a king, and you are right. I was born for that purpose. And I came to bring truth to the world. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true.” Do you remember what Pilate asks Jesus? “What is truth?” In other words, Pilate is saying he doesn’t believe there is anything such as objective truth.

Pilate’s idea of truth is what so much of the world today believes. Truth is whatever, we make it to be. Truth is whatever is practical at the moment. Truth is whatever makes me happy, wealthy, healthy, and in a better position than everyone else. I admit I share Pilate’s question far more often than I would like. I listen to politicians, economists, historians, and all kinds of other experts, who claim to possess the truth and I wonder, but whose truth is it?

Jesus told Pilate that his primary mission included the bringing of truth, and we will recognize the truth if we accept him as the truth. The problem, as demonstrated at Nazareth is that we know the truth when we hear it. God’s word is like two edge sword piercing our souls. I truly believe we know the truth, especially if we are at all familiar with Jesus’ words. Hearing the truth is not the

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problem; it never has been. The real problem is accepting it. We could say that the people of Nazareth were very ungracious in how they treated Jesus, I mean trying to kill him, but are we any better?

I know we are not prone to toss Jesus off a cliff, but what kind of a response do we give the truth in Jesus. Let us be honest that we have, at some point in our lives, played fast and loose with the truth.

We have bent the truth, twisted the truth, stretched the truth, and avoided the truth, or given only part of the truth. The full, God given truth in Christ, makes us uncomfortable, and we don't like being uncomfortable. When we hear the convicting words of Jesus, how do we respond? Jesus says, "Love your enemies as yourself". Can we try and do that, or do we say things like, "I don't really have any enemies".

Is this true? Just a few years ago, I was returning to the office after a Pastor's gathering, and on CFRB they were having quite a revealing discussion on the subject of who we hate. It was prompted by the TTC's (Toronto Transit Commission) public statement regarding the problem of strollers on buses and streetcars. The radio announcer, Mike Bullard, announced he hated people who wore backpacks on the buses.

Then people called in declaring among many things, they hated people who drove diagonally across parking lots, bought huge amounts of food at the Tim Horton's drive through, and then paid by debit, and the list went on. We claim we have no enemies, but we are very casual about the people we hate.

Jesus tells us not to be anxious, or worry about tomorrow. Do we check our anxiety at the door, or do we spend sleepless nights worrying about things we cannot control? Like that woman on the Tylenol Night-time pain reliever commercial wondering, "What if the Hokey Pokey, is what it's all about?"

Jesus calls us to be sacrificially generous, welcoming of those different than ourselves, ready at all times for his return, and many other truths. What do we do with such things? Ignore them, water them down, or rationalize them away? Truth for the people who claim they are Christians is not subjective. Yes, I know we wrestle with part of God's truth sometimes, but really, the critical things are straight forward.

Jesus when challenged about what two laws are most important in God's eyes said what? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, mind and strength." This is the first and most important law, but the second one is also just as important. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." Jesus then went on to say that these two laws sum up all the law and the prophets.

One biblical scholar said of these two laws, that this is the heart of following Jesus, and everything else is just commentary.

I don't want us to be like those folks in Nazareth, who heard the truth but refused to accept it. They wanted the miracles, but not the one who made the miracles happen.

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In embracing the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, we also are embracing the one who is the embodiment of truth, namely Jesus. Let us commit to listening carefully to his gracious words, so we can become gracious people.