

Living with Truth, Dwelling in Revelation  
Caldwell Presbyterian Church  
Nov. 9, 2014  
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Text: John 8:31-36

Ever since Cain and Abel, people with differences have been trying to find a way to get along.

It is the story of humanity, isn't it? But it is not just that. It is the story of God with humanity. God made peoples in every hue and heritage, every tribe and custom. We are, of course, so much the same at our core. Yet our humanity plays out in so many wonderful and varied ways.

But with our differences come division and disharmony or worse. It was so in Jesus' day and it is in our day. As we have said on many occasions before, Charlotte is on the forefront of U.S. cities that are living out this pluralistic potential. And, here at Caldwell, we strive not just to welcome all but to know each other and our differences, that our lives might be richer, individually and together.

So, on almost a daily basis, whether it is at work, or on the bus or in school or here at church, we are always asking ourselves: What is the best way to behave toward others who are different, be they immigrants or people of different classes or backgrounds or different sexual orientations? How do people of good intent live not just alongside others but in real community without stepping on toes, or worse?

As followers of Christ, our instinct, on our best days at least, is to look to Christ as our model. And in Christ we find a familiar example: Jesus is the one who reaches out to the "other" time and again. He ate with outcasts and tax collectors, he gave second and third chances, he comforted sinners, he healed the sick and gave sight to the blind. Yes, this kinder, gentler Jesus is the one we so often think of as our model.

But that is not the Jesus we find in the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John. This Jesus has an edge. This Jesus is tough-talking and tough-acting, even to those he wants to follow him, to accept his truth.

The entire Gospel of John is written in large part to emphasize Christ as the messiah and that is the context for the lesson we read a moment ago. Scripture says Jesus was addressing those who "continued in his word." That is a more literal translation than to

say they “believed” in Christ because the word “believe” is more final than was the case with these Jewish followers of Christ.

We might say they had one foot in and one foot out as far as following the Jesus way. They believed but they were hedging their bets by continuing to practice the ways of ancient Judaism. That was true for the Jews Jesus addressed in today’s passage and it was true for the audience to whom the Gospel of John was written decades after Christ walked the earth. The entire thrust of John is to emphasize Jesus as the Messiah.

So when scripture uses the word “slave” here, it is a reminder that these hearers of Jesus who were still servants of their Jewish heritage and tradition, even as they were intrigued by Jesus’ words and deeds. Jesus encouraged them by saying that if they continue in Jesus’ way, they will know the truth and the truth will set them free.

Those listening to Jesus that day didn’t get it. They thought Jesus was implying they were still somehow actual slaves, as their ancestors had been in Egypt before the exodus. But Jesus is talking more about a kind of eternal freedom. That’s how big the word “truth” is for Jesus, even though that meaning is initially lost on some of his followers.

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That’s the way it has always been with the idea of truth, I suppose. What is true? What is true to you? What is true to me? Is it the same thing?

It all depends on how we use that word, truth, doesn’t it? My truth is true to me. It is what I know, what I have experienced. But my truth may not be your truth, what you know, what you have experienced. In that sense, there is a kind of abstract aspect of truth that invites us to explore it, to plumb its depths and to share its abundance.

It’s when we put that article “the” in front of the word “truth” that changes it from being abstract to something more defined. Think about it. When we raise our children, we don’t teach them to tell “a” truth about what happened at school when they got in trouble. We don’t ask for “a” truth about whether they studied for the test they flunked or to explain why they missed their curfew

We want “the” truth. When someone is sworn in to testify in court, they are not asked to tell “a” truth, “a” whole truth and nothing but “a” truth. No, they are asked to bear witness to “the” truth and nothing but it.

We wouldn't get very far in life together, in community, in society if we did not have some kind of definitive truth that is the final backstop for how we live in communion together, peacefully and justly.

So, there is power in the word "truth" and how we use it. It can give life or take it away. We can use that word as a weapon or as an instrument of peacemaking.

As you may know, our Adult Christian Education Class is studying a book with the engaging title of What Christians Can Learn From Other Religions. To some, even today, those might as well be fighting words. Advancing the very idea that Christianity is not the only religion would have gotten me defrocked a hundred years ago. In fact it did, even among us Presbyterians. It might still today, in some faith traditions.

Thanks be to God that we have reached a day when we can read and discuss what Christianity has in common with Judaism, and what we could learn from Jews and their sense of memory as a people. Thanks be that we can study Islam and be edified by its commandments for tolerance, especially when all we see and hear are examples of the kind of extremist Islamic practices that defy its own holy scripture. Thanks be that we can learn a thing or two about spirituality and wisdom from Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and the sayings of Confucius. Thanks be that practitioners of those religions can learn and even admire a thing or two about Christianity.

And we welcome the day now that one of our own, a died-in-the-wool Presbyterian, former Caldwell intern Danny Trapp, is the executive director of our community's largest interfaith organization and is taking it in exciting directions. The fact that the Presbyterian church ordained him into that calling as a peacemaker and bridge-builder across religions may not seem like a big deal, but it is!

All of these are examples that there is truth in a range of experiences and perspectives. That choice becomes even more important given the direction of our world and our city. That is the value of diversity in all things as opposed to the kind of small world and small thinking that comes when we live in echo chambers full of people just like us. That is the value of being able to deal with the grey-ness of things, of relationships, of social dynamics, of powers and principalities rather than imposing some kind of dangerously simplistic black-and-white definition for the sake of a shallow truth. So, may God grant us the ability to dwell in that grey-ness of the world more and more.

At the same time, truth isn't cheap. Any real truth must be approached carefully, sensitively and wisely. Real truth isn't something we pick up in the drive-through lane of life with a side of fries and a Coke. Real truth must be held gently, pondered deeply and

internalized on some personal level. If it doesn't hold up to that kind of handling, it's probably not really truth.

So we are reminded that truth is a "both/and." Both abstract and concrete, and much of our lives is spent living in the tension between the two.

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Last week in worship, we heard a truth we needed to hear. It is not our truth. But in another sense it is. It is ours to hear and to process and to apply to our walk as a congregation in 2014 and beyond, all with God's guidance.

It is the truth that the money, about \$770,000 dollars in today's value, that built and furnished this sanctuary we love came from an estate whose financial value came from a working, pre-civil war plantation.

We hear this truth from multiple, if not unique perspectives. Each of us hears it in our own way. Some of us can draw direct family connections to slavery in the South, whether our people were slaves or slave-owners. It connects us to the past of our county, a part of that past we don't hear talked about much, a part this 21<sup>st</sup>-century, New South city might just as well forget.

It also connects us to a family that was not blood family to anyone here. It was a leading family in these parts in many ways, making lasting contributions to education, religious and social life over decades. Our role is not to condemn them. But to recognize their blindness, that we might avoid our own.

So now we know their family name is the name of our church, the church we love to tell people about as a place of radical welcome, a place that truly seeks justice for all, especially the marginalized of our city.

It is a truth that also connects us a congregation, as a church family, and, in all honesty, we don't quite know what that means. We're in uncharted waters here. Some might say, "Don't go stirring up hornets' nests. Leave the past alone." But, in this case, that is not the way of reconciliation. It is not the way of growth. It is not the way of honest faith.

As I wrote in my blog, last Monday I visited the northwest corner of our county that once was the old Glenwood plantation. I mentioned our interest in the story to one well-known native of that area and he kindly cautioned me. "You know, people around here are kind

of sensitive about that whole slavery thing.” I didn’t know if he was talking about white folks or black folks. Probably both.

So, what do we do with this truth now that it is out in the open, now that we have learned about this part of our identity?

One thing is to recognize that while there is factual truth to deal with, there is also emotional truth. This may not be our personal history. But, if we have the courage to internalize it, it is likely to stir up a range of emotions within each of us and among all of us. They may include guilt, anger, resentment. It may cause us to look on this beloved worship space in new ways.

Those emotions may also include confusion about what we can do to atone for sins we personally didn’t commit. All of those and more are honest and authentic reactions. In all of them there is the potential for healing.

Others of us may be moved to some kind of action, some kind of visible response. God can use that reaction, too. But let us not be in a hurry, even if it means we dwell with this truth a bit longer.

So, for now, perhaps what is best is just to live with it, actively and not passively, but with as little anxiety as possible.

After all, that is all that Jesus asks us to do with his revelation, his truth – to dwell fully with it and in it. That is what he was asking those who had one foot in and one foot out of his teachings and his way. We cannot know the truth of God’s grace in Christ if we do not dwell fully in it. We cannot fully know the mercy of God’s forgiveness if we hedge our bets.

In these days of the “nones” and so much resentment toward the church for trying to shove doctrine down people’s throats, Jesus’ invitation may sound dubious. It may sound as if Jesus is insisting. Jesus did have an edge that day. He was emphatic. But he was emphatic in invitation. He is inviting all to live with his truth, to dwell fully in the revelation of what God was and is doing through him.

It is nothing short of liberation, liberation from our sins, freedom from our failures as a society down through history and up until the sin we will commit today. It is a path of liberation that Jesus lays out for us and invites us to walk with the rest of our lives, with him and with each other.

On that day 2,000 years ago, when Jesus spoke to his Jewish followers, the confusion arose because those followers were not expecting to be reminded of their condition of slavery. They were not expecting to find their liberator in Jesus.

That's the way it is sometimes with liberators. That's the way it is sometimes with liberation. Sometimes God sends the liberator we need. But there is also a duty for each of us to look at our lives with brutal honesty and find the sin within us, in our time, in our relationships and even in our efforts to be the body of Christ.

With that in mind, I close with a quote from one whom God sent to help liberate our nation from its sins, the great African-American abolitionist and Union Army spy Harriet Tubman.

In reflecting on her life, she said, "I have freed many slaves and could have freed more if they only knew they were slaves."

Amen.