

“YOU CAN HANDLE THE TRUTH!”

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 21, 2017

Text: John 14:15-21

I have news for Jack Nicholson: We *can* handle the truth!¹

That is “the difference” it makes to believe in the Resurrected One.

Visiting Athens, the apostle Paul asserted to the philosophical citizens of that city that it makes a difference to love Christ instead of the gods they worshipped, including one they called “the unknown God.”

That admission of ignorance, their worshiping a God they didn’t even know, gave Paul a good starting point. He said “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” He proceeded to proclaim Christ as the Son of the Creator.

In our Gospel Jesus talks about the “ignorance” of the world in these terms:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom . . . the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

What role does this “x” factor play in our lives? What difference does it make to know Jesus, instead of not knowing Jesus? Here Jesus calls it “life”: “Because I live, you also will live.” He also refers to it as “truth,” as in “the Spirit of truth.”

Do we Christians know something others don’t know?

¹ Reference is to his character in the movie “A Few Good Men,” who loudly asserts, in the midst of a trial, that ordinary citizens are too weak to handle the truth about what the army can and must do to protect us.

On one hand, no. Absolutely not. Christians are not privy to superior knowledge about how to organize society, or even our families. Christians are not wiser about diet or physical fitness. Knowledge, wisdom, learning—it’s all out there for everyone. Proverbs 1 says,

Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks. (Proverbs 1:20-21)

Wisdom and knowledge are available to all. Nobody is totally lacking. Some listen better than others. But just being a Christian does not mean you are better either surgery or sales. Knowing Jesus does not make you an expert on biology or mathematics.

What is the extra factor? What does Jesus mean by the Spirit of truth which we will see and know but the world will not? What does it add to life? Most importantly, why does the knowledge of that truth not make Christians superior to others?

First: The Spirit of truth is the Spirit of Jesus Christ himself, which he breathed upon the church when he commissioned us to spread the gospel to others, so they could also have that Spirit. And that is the Spirit who calls, enlightens, and gathers us into the church, where we “live out of our faith.” It is the Spirit he breathed upon his disciples when he gave them authority to forgive sins.

When we have that Spirit, it replaces the spirit of criticism, the spirit of accusation, the spirit of fault-finding, the spirit of condemnation which seems to be the default setting on humanity. Woe are we because we “know” what is right and wrong. It turns out to have been a curse, what Adam and Eve

wanted badly enough to disobey God—the ability to distinguish right from wrong. We lost our naivete, and everybody became a critic of everybody else. To use Jeremiah’s language, people ever since have been teaching each other how to act. “Every man teaches his neighbor, saying ‘Know the Lord. Know the Lord.’”

To use Isaiah’s language, people ever since have been pointing the finger at one another. Gossiping about one another. Evaluating one another. Despising—or idolizing—one another. Using judgments of every sort to put other people down and raise ourselves up.

That spirit of criticism, found in people, is a mere shadow of God’s own criticism of us, made clear in the law of God. The difference is that when God criticizes it is the truth. When you and I live out of that spirit, we turn into hypocrites. We are selective. We water down the standards, and we skew the rules in a direction that favors us. With prejudice and favoritism we distort the truth so it comes out a lie. Double standards flourish. Yet even when we know, we can’t help ourselves. We keep pointing the finger. The habit is universal, because the Spirit of Criticism is universal. [Papua New Guineans don’t point with their fingers, but with their noses. They call it “sutim nus,” or “shooting the nose,” when you point out another’s fault.]

Along came Jesus.

And with him, a Spirit of truth which is clean contrary to the spirit of criticism. Jesus is not unaware of sin. He does not deny that people are sinful. But he stops what is going on among us, first by taking aim at hypocrites. The law of God does not pick targets, he said. “Unless you all repent, you will all die,” he said.

But that is when he brought to bear his peculiar gift to humanity—the Spirit of truth, a truth which does not wag its finger at us or sutim nus long mipela, but forgives us and restores us to holiness and life. The

truth of this Spirit is not less true than the Spirit of criticism, it is more true, certified by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The fact of its being certified in that particular way is what makes this Spirit of truth unrecognizable to the world. How could faith in a Crucified and Risen savior override all the truth the world already knows about people?

And yet, this is a most useful Spirit to us who receive it, who believe in it.

It doesn’t mean we don’t have standards or rules or law any more. But it does mean that you and I put a higher value on the power we have to forgive, to turn the other cheek, and to suffer than we do on the power to criticize others, to exact revenge, and to get what is coming to us.

By giving us the Spirit of truth, this truth, Jesus empowers us to value people the world devalues, to love the supposedly unlovable, and to forgive people who do things that are very wrong. Because we are dependent upon the truth of the Spirit of Christ, we no longer value people the way the world does, nor do we value our time or possessions the way the world does, because . . . we know the truth. We know that what we eat and what we wear are of little consequence compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ and being known by Christ.

The Spirit of truth which Jesus bestows upon us so we can be in him and he can be in us, does not simply squeeze itself in among all the other truths in the world. It is contrary to them. It is a gift from God, who is true. We don’t acquire this Spirit by studying hard and paying attention and practicing. We acquire it simply as something bestowed by Jesus because he wants us to have it.

Once we have it, we begin to keep Jesus’ commandments, as he says. And the whole world of Jesus’ commandments is written on our hearts, when the Spirit of truth is ours.

The truth is, without God's help no one can handle the whole truth about themselves. Not if the truth you are talking about is the facts about our thoughts, words, and deeds, if they were brought into the open for everyone to see. That truth is scathing. We can't handle it because it demands so much more than we can give. Who can love the Lord our God with all whole heart, soul, and mind? Who can love their neighbor as themselves?

But there is another truth, from God, which restores us who have gone astray. It is not scathing but soothing. We can handle it. Jesus promises we shall handle it. It shall be resident in his people. The world will see our humility and repentance and love of others, our forgiving and suffering and caring. And the world will wonder where that sort of truth can be found.

Amen.

