THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

June 9, 2019

John 14:8-17; Acts 2:1-21; Genesis 11:1-9

Before I say too much of anything this morning, I want to be clear about one thing. No one has a market on the truth. Put another way, truth is in the eye of the beholder. Therefore, what may be true for you may not be true for me. Can you think of something that would fit this situation? For me, I most often see the world as a glass that is half full, whereas for another person, especially given their life experience, that person might view the world as a glass that is half empty. Both perspectives are true.

In our gospel lesson for today, on the night of his arrest, we hear Jesus telling his disciples about the Spirit of truth that abides with them. Truth in this biblical context refers specifically to the divine will of God, which is much different than any kind of truth that is based on scientific evidence or on a series of observable facts. For example, Jesus says that this Spirit of truth abides with us, but there is no empirical evidence to prove that this statement is true. All that we can do is take Jesus at his word and trust that what he is saying is a truth to behold and experience according to the will of God.

Now, I don’t want to get too bogged down this morning in some kind of philosophical discussion, but based upon our gospel lesson for today, we do have to explore what truth this Spirit might be revealing to us about the will of God—all of which cannot be dependent solely upon what we read in the Bible. Sorry, Luther, but we cannot depend solely on what we read in the Bible because not everything that we read in the Bible can be taken literally as the gospel truth and have it be as applicable today as it was 2000 years ago. Besides, wasn’t it you, Luther, who coined the phrase, the living Word of God, to suggest that this Spirit that abides with us is constantly revealing to us what the will of God is for today?

Where all of this consideration about what is truth might be most relevant is in figuring out what is involved in Jesus command to love our neighbor as we have been loved by God. Does this love of neighbor include removing someone’s tent from the streets of San Francisco in order to improve the décor of the neighborhood? Does this love of neighbor include using food as a sanction against a country that is viewed as a threat to the people of our nation? Does this love of neighbor include going to war and killing thousands of our enemies if we deem that it is for the greater good?

Once I bring up this concept of good, I am reminded by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians that this Spirit of God has given us all kinds of gifts, talents, and abilities for the common good of all, which may not be limited to human beings, but also may include God’s entire creation. Given our propensity to sin, the common good often is superseded by what is best for me, or for my own good. It is this dynamic that seems to be dominating and running our country these days. That’s why we have been given this Spirit of truth—to expose what we perceive to be wrong in our society and to offer an alternative vision of what could be according to the will of God.

The early disciples on this day of Pentecost latched unto this notion of what could be when some of the first words out of Peter’s mouth included a quote from the prophet Joel about sons and daughters prophesying, young men and women seeing visions, old men and women dreaming dreams, and even slaves having the capacity and the capability to prophecy—all because this Spirit of truth has been poured out upon all flesh, not just a select few. In this realm of what could be is the place where this Spirit of truth is so much alive and is engaged in the salvation of the whole world.

The day before she left, Pastor Elizabeth sent me an article by John Wimberley, a pastor whom I happen to know from my time as a pastor in Washington DC. John makes the claim in this article that what the younger generations want more than anything else in the church is not digital screens and entertaining music, but rather a place where they can unplug their electronic devices and be inspired by a spiritual reality that leaves them feeling transformed and hopeful about their future.

Such is the reality that Jesus left for his disciples when he promised to give them this Spirit of truth that would abide with them forever. As a matter of faith, I would have to say that every one of us has this Spirit of truth abiding with us forever. All that we need to do is to detach ourselves from our virtual world for a few moments and listen—listen to this Spirit who will speak to us a living word of God and who also will give us the words to speak, as Jesus has promised, in order to advocate for those who are marginalized, impoverished, oppressed, or enslaved in any way.

In this day and age when we are bombarded with one reality show after another, our greater and deeper desire is for a spiritual reality that helps us to connect with the world in which we live and provides us with the lens of God’s truthful will in order to see and to know how to respond to all of the ways that the world beckons us to be a reflection of God’s love and an instrument of God’s peace. As the prophet Joel already suggested, in reality we are in the last days because like the people of Babel, we live in a culture where so many people are out to make a name for themselves and are afraid that they might lose everything if they don’t do everything in their power to secure and protect as much as they can for themselves.

The Spirit of truth enters into this situation and pleads with us to consider what is true, just, and right in the sight of God so that we might know how to live according to the will of God as revealed in Jesus, our Christ. This caveat, as revealed in Jesus, our Christ, is so important because if we only had the image of God as portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures, we would be left with the impression that we are allowed to fight, pillage, kill, and destroy according to the will of God in order to rid this world of all those who are opposed to the God whom we have created in our own image. Jesus leaves us with quite a different image of God—one that is full of grace, love, compassion, forgiveness, justice, peace, and freedom for all people.

This Spirit of truth that Jesus pours out upon us today also is the Spirit of God that reminds us that advocacy is at the heart of what we are called to be and do as followers of Jesus. Yes, Jesus did feed those who were hungry, healed those who were sick, and exorcised those who were demon-possessed. However, Jesus did not stop with his acts of charity; he also spoke out against all of the injustice, oppression, corruption, and violence of his day and called to task both the civil and religious leaders for their hardness of heart, their self-indulgent behavior, their hypocritical posture, and their covetous ways.

Listening to this Spirit of truth and following in the way of Jesus will take us beyond party politics and will help us to see and hear of another way that welcomes everyone at the table, is prejudice toward no one, respects the rights of everyone, pursues equality and equity for all people, ensures that everyone has enough food to eat and adequate healthcare, refrains from any form of force or violence, knows the things that truly make for peace in this world, and strives toward the freedom of all people. These relational dynamics are not partisan issues; they are what the Spirit of truth would tell us is the will of God as a result of Jesus’ testimony and witness, if only we would listen.

The questions still remain, “What if we both are listening to the Spirit of truth, and we hear two different things? Then what? Is one message true according to the will of God, and the other message false and contrary to the will of God?” Certainly there were false prophets in the time of Israel and Judah who would declare, “Thus saith the Lord,” and would claim that what they were saying was the true Word of God. In this case, it was left up to the community, usually in hindsight, to determine what message was true and which one was false. However, even if we go beyond the individual and include the whole community in listening to the Spirit and discerning the will of God, different communities also can end up having different perspectives on what the truthful will of God is.

When listening to the Spirit of truth becomes such a source of conflict, then perhaps we have very little recourse except to turn our eyes and ears toward the One who has promised to give us this Spirit in the first place and measure what we are seeing and hearing against Jesus’ own testimony and witness, because no one better than Jesus has ever revealed to us what the will of God is. For this reason, one of our primary responsibilities as disciples of Jesus is to individually and corporately pay attention—pay attention to all that Jesus has said and done, and we will be closer to the truth than we could ever dare to imagine or envision. Such is the focus of this Pentecost Day—to imagine and envision what could be according to Jesus’ revelation, and then live into this imagination and vision by the power of the Spirit of truth. Amen.