

---

Sermon  
***The Spirit of Truth***

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant  
Hope Unitarian Church  
April 18, 2010

---

First Reading: Philip Jenkins. "Fighting Words". *Christian Century*, March 23, 2010. Page 22.

In 449, the leading fathers of the Christian church met in Ephesus, in Asia Minor, to debate pressing theological issues. At a critical moment, a band of monks and soldiers took control of the meeting hall, forcing bishops to sign a blank paper on which the winning side later filled in its own favored statement. The document targeted the patriarch of Constantinople, Flavian, one of the three or four greatest clerics in the Christian world. Yelling "Slaughter him!" a mob of monks attacked Flavian, beating him so badly that he died a few days later. So outrageous was the intimidation that the ultimate winners in the conflict invalidated this whole council. They repudiated it as a *Latrocinium* – loosely, a Gangster Synod.

. . .

From a modern point of view, we are baffled to see such extraordinary violence unleashed over what might appear to be a trivial philosophical row. Surely, we might think, these debates involved overfine distinctions quite as trivial as the proverbial disputes over the number of angels who could sit on the head of a pin.

Second Reading: Vogt, Von Ogden. *The Primacy of Worship*. Starr King Press, Boston, MA, 1958. Page 8.

Many minds will rebel against the suggestion of an absolute. There are no absolutes, they say, all is relative, change is universal, there is no such existence as the absolute.

. . .

Without attempting to resolve this dilemma, may we not, nevertheless, find religious absolutes. Are there not absolutes in the sense of unqualified demands of religion? I suggest that there are three such.

The first is the spirit of truth – not particular truths, but the love of truth; not specific beliefs, but the perpetual search for more and more of the truth. Oftentimes in the past, ideas once widely held to be truths have been later found to be in error. It must always be a risk to base religion upon any particular of beliefs. Many religions have required adherence to particular beliefs, few have simply demanded the spirit of truth as an absolute above and beyond all particular truths whatsoever.

Third Reading: John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Chapter 2: Of the liberty of thought and discussion*, 1859

But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

Sermon

“You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” I’ve always liked those words from the bible. You will find them in the Gospel of John. Even during the time of my life when I would have dismissed any thought of religion those words had a hold on me. “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” They were and are doubly meaningful to me because they speak of both truth and freedom and insist that the two are linked together. All one has to do is find the truth and then you will be free. The language is declarative. The truth is. There’s no question about it. The truth is out there and it is concrete, tangible and objective. It is something to be defined and embraced. And having been found and embraced, it is a magic talisman that sets one free. It follows that those who don’t have the truth are not free.

In the Gospel of John the truth has a tangible embodiment in the form of Jesus. Jesus is the truth. It is not enough to say he speaks the truth. He is the truth. He is the word of truth itself, hence the opening line of that Gospel, “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. It is language that hammers home the idea that the truth is not something abstract, but concrete and specific. To embrace Jesus, therefore, is to embrace the truth. That’s what some people believe.

It’s an understanding of truth that is a two edged sword. It makes truth absolute and attainable. And that absolute and attainable quality also makes it vulnerable. You can see that vulnerability in the passage I quoted two weeks ago from the Apostle Paul:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised;  
and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain  
and your faith has been in vain.

Truth becomes an all or nothing proposition and the consequences are not always what one might want. Those who teach God is the author of the world and answers our prayers when we are in desperate need must confront the logical consequences. If God is such an absolute controller of our lives, then it was God who put us in desperate need in the first place. And to think of truth in such absolutist terms has secular as well as religious consequences. It serves the interests of those who would make leadership into a cult of personality. It is the concept that supported the leadership claims of Stalin and Lenin as well as Jim Jones. All were said to embody the absolute and tangible truth.

But truth is. It is what it is. That cannot be changed. I do not believe for an instant that each of us has his or her own truth and that each of our separate and different truths is equally valid. I believe that's nonsense. When it comes to truth I am an absolutist. And one of the truths I hold absolutely is human imperfection. We human beings are not capable of knowing perfectly. The truth, the absolute truth, is out there, but we are not capable of obtaining it. We may know part of it, but we can never know entirely. That is the problem with much of what passes for religion and theology. For thousands of years uncounted human beings have announced with absolute certainty that they know the nature and mind of God. They know who is saved and who is not. They know what it means to be saved. But there is a problem. Some people know with absolute certainty that the nature and mind of God are just figments of human imagination – nothing more than that bit of undigested beef and underdone potato that Charles Dickens wrote about, while others know with equal certainty what God had for breakfast yesterday morning and the precise words that will compel him – literally compel him – to give you whatever you want. I'm not making that up. If you don't believe me, then you need to spend more time listening to TV evangelists. Most religions that have ever existed have been based on that kind of certainty. And the words of Paul apply to all of them – atheist or theist, deist or naturalist. If the dot of a single "i" or the cross of a single "t" is out of place, then it all falls apart. Absolute religion based on absolute and perfect knowledge of the truth is always something fragile and brittle – hard, but easily shattered. It is why I care not for claims of absolute truth whether they come from Pat Robertson or Bill Maher.

There is always the hope that we will ultimately know the truth. The Apostle Paul speaks of that hope.

<sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

<sup>12</sup>For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.<sup>1</sup>

There is hope that someday we will know the truth, absolute truth. But I do not believe it because I do not believe in human perfectibility. And there's the problem – the claim to have hold of the absolute truth is not really a claim about the perfection of God. In reality it is a claim of human perfection. It is a claim less about the nature of God and more about human nature, more about narcissism and the justification of human prejudice.

The story of what happened to Flavian, the Patriarch of ancient Constantinople, is ancient history, but it could just as easily have been an article in this morning's newspaper. Last year a doctor was murdered in Kansas because someone believed he had possession of that kind of absolute, concrete and tangible truth. It is the basis for the Catholic church protecting child molesters lest the Church – as the worldly embodiment of the Truth – be questioned. It is the rationale for suicide bombers in the Middle East, the murder of girls in Afghanistan for going to school that they might learn to read and write, and our very own home grown terrorist, Timothy McVeigh, who decided women and children were legitimate targets because he possessed the

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:11-12

absolute and certain truth. Contrary to what Von Ogden Vogt said, there is no reason to be baffled at the sight of extraordinary violence unleashed over matters that should never justify murder because all too often they do.

Truth is important. It is why churches frequently talk about the truth or seeking truth as part of their mission or vision. This church does, having adopted as its vision statement the words, "Seeking Truth, Sharing Love." I believe it is a good and worthy sentiment – if we are willing to emphasize the seeking part. The danger, as Von Ogden Vogt said, comes when we try to base religion upon truth that has been captured and put in a cage. Truth is a wild thing. No one can own it. If we are to be worthy of it, then ours must be a religion based not on what we think the truth is, but on our commitment to the spirit of truth. To be committed to the spirit of truth is to put aside the claim to possess the truth. It is to put aside the claim that truth is on our side. Rather, it is to say we will pursue truth wherever it goes.

At one time in human history it made sense to believe the heavens revolved around the world. At one time it made sense to believe the earth had come into existence just a few thousand years ago. We now know such beliefs to be in error. If one is to honor the truth, then one must separate truth from belief. As Von Ogden Vogt said, it is always "a risk to base religion upon any particular of beliefs." The proper basis for religion is not truth, it is the spirit of truth. Religion becomes idolatrous, it becomes ossified and set in stone when it claims to be based on the infallible and absolute truth. That is why religions should not write creeds. As Andre Gide said, "Believe those who are seeking the truth; doubt those who find it." Creeds become a necessity for religions not because they are true, but because it is only by compulsory recitation without thinking that people will believe what they say. That is the reason for the Roman Catholic claim of Papal infallibility. The doctrine of Papal Infallibility was unknown before the 1830's. Within forty years of its invention it was made a matter of absolute doctrinal truth by the Roman church not because it was true, but because the church recognized people had begun to question the Pope's statements. But do not be too proud. As Unitarians we have flirted with our own form of idolatry with our national statement of Principles and Purposes and other matters.

"You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." I remain captivated by those words from the Gospel of John. But I believe Clarence Darrow better captured the spirit of truth when he said, "The pursuit of truth shall set you free – even if you never catch up with it." The spirit of truth stands against idolatry in any form, be it the idolatry of creeds, of Principles and Purposes or a claim of human infallibility.

A religion based on the spirit of truth is not one that will remain unchanged. A religion based on the spirit of truth is one that will necessarily be open to growth. It will not be the same tomorrow as it is today, nor as it was yesterday. It is a religion that will not silence dissent or the expression of opinion. It will recognize honest differences of opinion as the opportunity to grow and to learn. A religion based on the spirit of truth will recognize – as John Stuart Mill said – that to silence opinion is, if the dissent is right, to deprive ourselves of the opportunity to exchange error for truth and if the dissent is wrong to lose "the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error." A religion based on the spirit of truth is a religion that does not fear

the future. It is a religion that says we need not be afraid of people just because they are different than we are. It is a religion that says truth is more important than creed.

It is in that spirit that this church is one committed not to creed but the spirit of truth. It is why this church is not a retreat or place of rescue from the storms of life. There is a genuine need for a place of safety. And this church is here to serve those needs as well. But our primary purpose is to be a church that sees religion as an adventure of the spirit. As Francis Greenwood Peabody – a Unitarian minister – said some ninety years ago, “If . . . religion is to deal with life as it really is, it must satisfy, not alone the desire for safety, but not less the spirit of adventure.” That is why we must be committed to the Spirit of Truth.

Amen.