

“Belonging to the Truth”

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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I Timothy 2:1-7, John 18:33-38

Our first passage, from Paul’s first letter to Timothy, is actually one of the assigned readings for Thanksgiving Day. Note, in the beginning of the passage, Paul tells his young charge to pray and give thanks for everyone, including rulers and people in high positions. One would assume Paul meant even those he didn’t particularly like. Listen to why he tells him to do this. It is not just to live a quiet and peaceable life; it is because God wants all people to come to know a deep truth, a truth that Paul believes can heal the brokenness of the world. As you hear Paul describe Christ Jesus as a mediator between God and humanity, I encourage you to think about this in terms of the way Jesus lived and died. Think about what his words and actions, and his commitment to compassion and not responding to evil with evil, could teach every human being on the face of the earth. *Read I Timothy here.*

Our second reading for today comes from the 18th chapter of John. To set the narrative in context, it is early in the morning on Good Friday. Jesus has been handed over to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate by the religious authorities, who want Pilate to sentence him to death, ostensibly because they say he is a criminal and a threat to Rome. But their real motivation is that Jesus has threatened the religious leaders’ own power and influence. As you hear the interaction between Jesus and Pilate, listen to how Jesus uses the word truth. Know, too, that truth and love are favorite words in the Gospel and the letters of John. *Read John here.*

Earlier today, we baptized Sami and Tori Lawrence, Heather and Barry’s twin ten year old daughters. Before Dan and I put water on their heads, the girls and their parents made vows. And so did we as a congregation. We promised to help them learn and live out what it means to be followers of Jesus and members of his church. And as the twins stood, their heads held high at the font of grace, together we again affirmed our belief in Jesus, and in the love of God which Jesus came to make known.

While infant baptisms can be so precious and moving, and they are certainly a testimony to how God loves us before we are ever able to respond, there is something about the baptism of older children or adults that gets me every time. I think that is because it is clear there is a choice involved on their part, some level of understanding of what the baptism they are receiving means. At some level, they get it.

There are a variety of ways to make sense of baptism. As a sacrament, it is a visible sign and seal of God’s invisible grace. It is like a stamp of authenticity - a Good Housekeeping guarantee - reminding us that no matter what happens to us in the course of our days on earth (and rest assured, they will not always be easy), we can rely upon God’s love for and commitment to us. The reformer Martin Luther regarded it in this way, and this is why he would every so often put a hand on his head like this, in the midst of a bad day or a bad week or a bad month or a bad year, and say, “I am baptized.”

Then, too, the waters of baptism evoke being washed, so we rightly regard them as a sign that God does not hold our human fallibility and sin against us: God's abiding love for us is not contingent upon what we do. It is a good thing, because we all fall short of living out God's best intention for our lives.

But as much as anything, I think baptism is our acknowledgement that we belong to God. We belong to a Truth that is larger than ourselves and our fragile egos, a challenging Truth that places expectations on our behavior in this world, a Truth that meets us where we are...yes, but loves us way too much to let us stay that way. It is a Truth that was fleshed out in Jesus. This Truth has become the very core of my own theology, and in a world that more and more heaps scorn on claims for absolute truth, I regard it as absolute, non-negotiable, foundational: God is love and God's love longs to be embodied in human beings.

When Jesus, standing head held high before Pilate, said, "*For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the Truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,*" I think this is the truth he was talking about. The truth of love embodied, love willing to be vulnerable and to forgive and to serve.

What does it mean to belong to that Truth? Well, I think we first have to ask what it means to belong to anything. When we say of a place or an organization, I feel like I belong here, we are communicating, "I fit in. I feel welcome. I have a place and a purpose here." This, by the way, is a challenge for all of us at Immanuel. When people visit us and start to become a little more active, it is incumbent upon us to do what we can to help them feel that they fit in, that they have a place and a purpose. We tend, I think, to be a little shy about asking people to get involved. But becoming involved is the way people begin to feel they have a place and a purpose. It is the way people begin to feel welcome. So personally invite people you know to come and join you as a part of a study group or a committee, a Habitat work project or the prayer shawl knitting group. Be hospitable. Henri Nouwen says that hospitality is "creating a space for the other."¹ So make room. Invite people. Reach out to people you haven't yet come to know well.

To belong to something or someone certainly usually means that we have a sense of feeling at home. But to belong to something or someone connotes something more than just a sense of comfort and ease. It also involves commitment.

I have tried not to be too boastful in sharing with some of you that my younger daughter, Martha, made the freshman basketball team at McLean. When I picked her up on Friday night, she gave me that news. And then she told me, "Dad, we have practice on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday of Thanksgiving Week." It took just a few seconds for the implications of that to sink in, as I realized how that was going to affect our travel plans for Thanksgiving. When I called my mom and dad to tell them that we were not coming to South Carolina for Thanksgiving after all, they were disappointed, but they understood. Martha belonged to a team, and that involved commitment.

In baptism, we acknowledge that we not only belong to a team (more precisely, a community of faith), we belong to a Truth, a truth that has a claim on us and on how we live and on all that we do. It is a

big T-truth that shapes how we look at all the other commitments in our life, whether that is how we conduct ourselves in our various workplaces (whether we are infectious disease doctors or financial planners, teachers or lawyers, or whatever occupation we happen to hold), or whether that is how we spend our time and resources in retirement. That truth shapes us in terms of how we approach our schoolwork and how we treat our schoolmates. It helps us keep our other commitments in perspective, as it reminds us that there really are priorities more important than the acquisition of more and more material things, or the endless pursuit of approval, or planning and anticipating the next fun outing. It reminds that there are even things more worthy of our commitment than the sports teams on which we happen to play or for which we happen to root.

Last week, I shared from this pulpit the story of Rosemary Atkinson and her generous bequest to Immanuel on behalf of the Dreamer Program. I didn't know when I shared that story that she and at least one other member of this congregation shared a common connection to Brearly, a girl's private school in New York City. Rosemary's mother taught there and Rosemary herself attended the school, I believe.

The Brearly Alma mater, which was sung and referred to on a regular basis, created a certain ethos in its students. It was a song that was unafraid to speak of truth with a capital T and in the same breath to speak of toil, the hard work and commitment that it took to live lives that belonged to and were claimed by this truth.

It went like this.

*By truth and toil united we strive with loyal heart
To gain life's deepest blessing and learn life's nobler part;
For truth is life's great secret, which we through toil may share
And by that truth made wise and free, to be all truth shall dare.*

*Truth cometh not unsought for, the spirit's purest light
Must burn undimmed and clearly to guide our minds aright
So standing here together, triumphant thanks we give
That here our spirit's flame is fired by truth and toil to live.²*

That song fueled in Rosemary a sense of stewardship of all of life, including her finances. She belonged to that Truth, she worked for it. And every time we baptize someone, we are acknowledging that they and we belong to that truth, too. Belonging to that Truth leads us to forgive and ask for forgiveness from others, to regularly be in worship as we give thanks and praise to God, and to work for compassion and justice and mercy, among other things

Frederick Buechner defined truth in this way in his book *Wishful Thinking, a Seeker's ABC*.

When Jesus says that he has come to bear witness to the truth, Pilate asks, "What is Truth?" Contrary to the traditional view that his question is cynical, it is possible that he asks it with a lump in his throat. Instead of Truth, Pilate has only expedience. His decision to throw Jesus to the wolves is expedient. Pilate views

humankind as alone in the universe with nothing but its own courage and ingenuity to see it through. That is enough to choke up anybody.

Pilate asks, "What is truth?" And for years there have been politicians, scientists, theologians, philosophers, poets and so on to tell him. The sound they make is like so many crickets chirping.

Jesus doesn't answer Pilate's question. He just stands there. Stands, and stands there.³

What Jesus is doing when he stands there is bearing witness to the Truth of embodied love; a Truth for which he is willing to die. It is a Truth which not only lets us know that we are loved, it is a Truth which also calls for real commitment.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ See Henri Nouwen's fine book, *Reaching Out*.

² Gail Nields is a Brearly alum. She attended the school for 13 years. She passed the words of the alma mater on to me when she shared her mutual connection to Brearly with Rosemary and Rosemary's mother.

³ Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC...* (San Francisco: Harper One, 1993 ed.).