

“The Guide to the Truth”
Acts 2: 1 – 21 John 15: 26 – 27, 16: 4b – 15
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Several years ago, I took a course in clinical hypnosis where I learned some basic principles that have served me well ever since. Consider these foundational statements: Always respect the integrity of the individual and trust the process of the unconscious toward healing. Even before I took that course, I had already been taught that the primary point of contact between the human spirit and the spirit of God was located somewhere in the deepest layers of the unconscious mind. Through my years of counseling and pastoral ministry, I have accumulated enough experience so that my trust in the internal spiritual process has become well grounded.

Building on the foundation of those principles, I learned another very useful guideline that has served me well. I learned to avoid making statements that I could not establish as true. Now, that may seem too obvious, particularly if we don't believe in lying. Unfortunately, human experience with language often doesn't turn out to be that clear and simple.

The truth is (if I can say it that way) that we make statements all the time that we cannot verify as true statements. We don't necessarily do this with malicious intent, nor is it usually even conscious. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

A few years ago, I had a counseling client who was trying to be more positive in his communications with his wife. After trying his new approach, he was very discouraged when he came to his next session. He told me that when he had arrived home, his wife wasn't in the kitchen where he expected to see her. He finally found her sitting at her dressing table. He greeted her, and then, trying to be positive, he said, “You're really beautiful.” She glared at him and responded, “No, I'm not!” Before he even knew what had happened, they were in a fight.

When he came to see me the next time, he wanted to know what had gone wrong. I suggested that he had actually exceeded the limits of his authority when he made what turned out to be an arguable statement about her. That is to say, he stated an opinion, not a verifiable truth. He needed to learn how to stay within the authority of his own experience. So instead, he might have said something like, “I love looking at you” or “To me you are the most beautiful person in the world.” She might have thought he was crazy or had poor taste, but she couldn't argue with the truth of his experience.

There are some other communication habits that tend to move us, albeit unintentionally, beyond the truth. Sometimes we talk about things we wish were the truth when we have neither the information nor the authority to make such statements. And sometimes we take someone else's statement on the faith that it must be the truth. We want to believe that the speaker would not lie to us (intentionally or unintentionally). This last happens way too much in political (to say nothing of religious) discourse.

I am taking this much time to talk about the meaning of truth because it is central in our understanding and practice of religion. Furthermore, it clearly was an issue for Jesus and the

disciples, too. When the disciples and others asked their questions, they were looking for clear and unambiguous answers that they could rely on as being the truth. Jesus often answered in ways that required them to open up their understanding so that they could embrace the deeper truth he offered. Here's an example of what can happen if the truth is understood too narrowly. This is a true story.

When I lived in another state I knew of a Baptist church in a nearby town. Let's call the town Waynesworld (not it's real name, or course).

There arose a conflict within the congregation at the Waynesworld Baptist Church. (Oh, by the way, this story is not primarily about a problem with Baptists. It could be about almost any religious denomination.)

A certain group of people in the church felt that the congregation was not holding carefully enough to "the truth". When the split became evident in the congregation, that disgruntled group left the Waynesworld Baptist Church to erect another church a few blocks away. They named it the Truth Baptist Church. Wouldn't you know it, a few years later a similar conflict arose within the new church. Once again it had to do with whether or not they were holding precisely enough to the truth as some people understood it. When the congregation seemed ready to split again, the rumor began circulating that the unhappy group was planning to leave to start the "Whole Truth Baptist Church".

I don't know how far it went, but given that narrow way of thinking, who could avoid the speculation that, given time, Waynesworld would probably have a "Nothing-But-The-Truth Baptist Church" as well?

While this is a funny story, it contains a dangerous belief: that truth can (perhaps even should) be understood absolutely, with the result that some people will think they possess the truth, and all others must be just plain wrong.

It is probably obvious to you that I see how truth functions somewhat differently. So, what might be a different, perhaps healthier way to understand truth? Try this on for size: truth is more about the integrity of a relationship than it is about having absolutely accurate information. Furthermore, the movement toward truth must be seen as a process rather than as an event.

People sometimes ask me if I believe in absolutes. Though I can't ever know precisely what those absolutes actually are, theoretically, I can accept that they might exist. From a practical standpoint, though, I see absolutes more as directions rather than destinations. That is to say that we can move toward truth, but we can never reach it completely.

The process of moving in an increasingly truthful direction takes place in the midst of life. This is one way to understand religious transformation. Let's go back to Jesus and the disciples for a moment. When Jesus called them to follow him, they each had a fairly traditional understanding of what the Messiah was supposed to accomplish. Even though he gave them lots of opportunity to see things differently, they stubbornly held onto their beliefs. Several times, he told them that he had to go away in order for them to come to their fullness, but they didn't want to hear it. Our reading from John today describes one of his attempts.

In this reading, he tells them that when he leaves, another will come to guide them. He refers to this “other” as the “Counselor” or the “Spirit of Truth”. Of course, any modern Christian “knows” that he is referring to the Holy Spirit. This passage is important because it gives us a sense of how the spirit works. The Spirit is the agent that moves us towards the truth. Jesus specifies sin, righteousness, and judgment as areas where the Spirit will “convince the world”.

So, is this process of convincing simply an intellectual exercise that gets us to believe the “right” ideas? Is it simply a matter of whether we interpret the scriptures correctly? Is it only about our potential obedience in believing the particular interpretation that we have been handed? These are significant questions that strike at the heart of what it means to be followers of Jesus.

One thing is certain. When we are guided to the truth, it often ends up being quite different from what we expect. The Spirit has a habit of leading us beyond what we might expect. For this reason, it is important for us to restrain our tendency to jump to judgment. Sometimes we have to wait to see what will happen so that we can learn from experience.

Diversity in a church is one example. Often, people who have been members of a local church for a long time end up fearing the changes that inevitably come with the arrival of new people. They are ready to defend the old ways of doing things, believing that those must be the right ways. Too often when we find ourselves in such a situation, we succumb to the temptation to move out of our area of authority by means of our pre-judgments about others and their ideas. I hope that we can remain honest about our personal experience, while the process of transformation opens us up to learn from the personal experience of others.

This approach applies in many ways. It applies to our political decisions about immigration. It applies whenever we try to sort out what is fair and just to all parties. It applies to forms of worship. It applies to the economic systems that either support community or tear people apart from one another. It applies to our desire to come to a faithful and trusting relationship with God, even when things are not going the way we might prefer them to go. In every case, we can learn to be open to the Guide who will lead us beyond our short-sighted views and help us to grow towards the Realm of God.

Sometimes it’s a hard process to go through, but with the Spirit leading us, it’s worth it. On this Pentecost Sunday, let’s celebrate our process of transformation.