

## Opening Up John 14:15-21

*Sixth Sunday of Easter/ 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020*

With the coming of Pentecost in two weeks, we turn our attention toward the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Moving out of Eastertide, we're on the threshold of Spirit-tide, the time of the Holy Spirit. Actually, it's always Holy Spirit-time. Ever since Christ's ascension, which the Church will celebrate this coming Thursday, and the coming of the Spirit, we have been, are, and will continue to be in the season of the Spirit. And it's not just any "spirit," but a Holy Spirit, a Spirit who is Holy, who was there with God as the beginning at creation (Proverbs 8:22-31) and then tasked to work on behalf of Jesus to continue extend the work of God across time and space—in you and me, in us and through us, the church.

"If you love me," Jesus said to his disciples and says to us if we want to follow him, "you will keep my commandments" (Jn. 14:15).

Now don't worry if this sounds too difficult, too demanding, Jesus has you covered. Jesus will ask his Father for help. God will send someone else, "another Advocate," Jesus said (Jn. 14:16). They already have one advocate in Jesus, but God will send an additional Advocate to be with us, not just for a time, like Jesus, but forever. The name says is all: Advocate. *Parakleton*, meaning someone who comes to our aid as in a court of law, one who pleads our case, who intercedes for us. It's a judicial term. This Advocate speaks on our behalf, vouches for our integrity, enlists support for our cause, our case, our truth, truth itself. The Advocate equips us to be faithful witnesses to what we know. The Advocate empowers us to do the work of God, which is the work of Jesus, which is the work of love, and love never dies. And we can't love Jesus and the people and things that Jesus loves (such as justice) without help.

Now, this way of loving does not come easy to us. It's demanding and difficult. We can't will our way into living, loving this way. No one has the capacity to live this way. We are too caught up in the distorted systems of the world—the *kosmos*, as John liked to say—too bound by these systems to see our way clearly into the way of Jesus. The distorted, dehumanizing systems of the world, which we helped to create and continue to support and benefit from, hinder and hamper us from loving this way, God's way, the Jesus way. It's well-nigh impossible to live the Jesus way without help. It's well-nigh impossible to live in Christ's light when our hearts are dark and darkened by systems of power and privilege and sin that impede our ability to live truthful lives.

Therefore, it's significant—and this must not be missed—that the Advocate given *in* love to enable us *to* love is described by Jesus as "the Spirit of truth" (Jn. 14:17). That's because for the follower of Jesus, *love is always connected to truth*. This is a deep current flowing through John's Gospel. Love and truth cannot be separated because they were never separated in Jesus' own life. In fact, Jesus and truth are interwoven and explicitly wedded together to the point of being synonymous.<sup>1</sup> The word "truth" shows up all over John's Gospel. Think of John 14:16, where Jesus states clearly, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

~ ~ ~ ~

You're probably thinking or saying right about now: what do we mean by "truth"? We could be here forever answering this question. We could just blow off the question like Pilate before Jesus and say, "What is truth?" (Jn. 18:38). Sarcastic, skeptical, cynical Pilate. He wasn't really curious. He wasn't really after truth. He never waited long enough for Jesus to answer.

As difficult as it might be to talk about "truth" in our cynical, skeptical, postmodern, post-Enlightenment, post-Christian, post-everything world, John wants us to see that Jesus was sent to *be* truth. Standing before Pilate, Jesus 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" (Jn. 18:37).

When we consider the word "truth" we might think of *the* Truth; or *absolute* truths that are always true, such as the sun always rises in the east; or propositional truths, such as Annapolis is the capital of Maryland. These are true, not false. We think of truth as ideas, concepts, facts we conclude are true until proven false. Until the sun comes up in the west, the truth about the location of the sunrise will remain. And so we view the *truth* as that which isn't *false*. This is one way to approach truth, but it isn't exactly what Jesus is talking about when he refers to truth.

Now this might get a little heady, but stay with me.

The Greek word *alētheia*, translated as "truth," has many shades of meaning. For Plato and Aristotle, for example, and others, including the writers of the New Testament such as John, *alētheia* was understood as "unconcealment," as "unhiddedness," as that which is "uncovered." Truth is that which is no longer hidden or concealed or veiled, but now something that we can see or experience or relate to.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus was sent by God to be truth, or we could say, Jesus was sent to *truth* (as a verb). Jesus was sent to disclose, uncover, unconceal, reveal, open up the nature of God, disclose the distorted nature of our lives, uncover the systems of the world at odds with God. Truth is opening up. That's the way Jesus lived his life as truth. It's also what happens to us, what he does for us whenever we are near him.

The brilliant New Testament scholar and theologian Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976), who wrote a classic commentary on John, drives the point home: "Jesus is the truth; he does not simply state it. One does not come to him to ask about truth; one comes to him as the truth. This truth does not exist as a doctrine, which could be understood, preserved, and handed on, so that the teacher is discharged and surpassed. Rather the position [one] takes vis-à-vis the Revealer decides not whether he knows the truth, but whether he is 'of the truth.'"<sup>3</sup>

We are people "of the truth." This is why a Christian never possesses the truth about God or Christ or the gospel—or anything else, for that matter. We don't "own" these ideas. We don't have the truth, we *belong* to truth, as Jesus said to Pilate. We belong to the one who reveals the

truth about God and the nature of ourselves and the world and what really matters. We belong to the one who reveals and discloses more than we could ever see or know on our own!

And so the work of the “Spirit of truth” continues to open us up to the work of Jesus, which is the work of God, which is the work of love in us and through us. Again, the profound connection between love and truth in the Christian life can’t be severed. And, significantly, the way *into* truth, the way into the *belonging*, the way into the *relationship* is always through love: God’s love first toward us and then our love to our neighbor. We could say, then, that love opens up the world. Scottish theologian Elizabeth Templeton (1945-2015) often talked about the Christian critique of knowledge, that is, the Christianly way of coming to know anything in this world. She said, “...you cannot know what you do not love.”

Jesus calls us to love him, follow his commandments, walk in his ways and when we do, the the Spirit of truth will help us through all of it. In love the Spirit opens up the world and leads us deeper into reality, deeper into life. And the Spirit continues the work of revealing, disclosing, opening, opening us and in us. When the Spirit is at work in us, when Christ’s light shines, we can step out of the shadows and enter the world and our lives in new and transformed ways.

This means, therefore, that when the Spirit of truth is at work in us, followers of Jesus become advocates of the Spirit’s work. We can’t hide our love for God and for what God loves. We can’t conceal the joy that is within us. We can’t mask our love for one another. Because we love the Lord, Jesus-folk can’t sit by and do nothing when we see people hiding and concealing the very things God wants to bring into the light of day. Because we love the Lord, we can’t settle for lies. It’s because we love God’s people so much that we want to uncover racism and injustice and systems that abuse. In love, we want to call it all out, name it, bring it to light. Because in love, we cannot be complicit with others who want to suppress the truth, even if it’s painful. In love, we are really free to confess our complicity in the injustices in our communities, in the pain and hurt we have caused our neighbors, confess the truth that we consistently fail our neighbors. Because we love we advocate for truth and call out those telling lies or trying to gaslight a nation or removing people from their jobs because they are exposing truths that some don’t want to hear, truths that could save people’s lives. We don’t conceal the numbers of those who have the virus or are being tested because it might make the United States or its President look bad or weak. In love for our neighbor, we need to count and know and test.

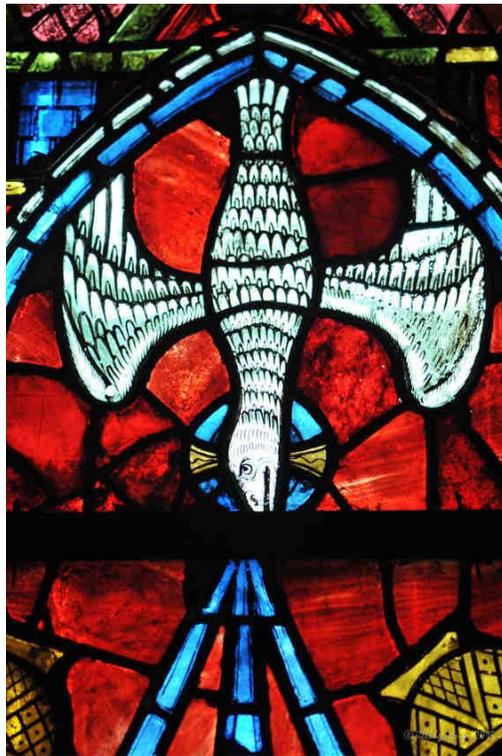
~ ~ ~ ~

On Thursday afternoon about a dozen members of Baltimore Presbytery engaged in a conversation around how the coronavirus pandemic is exposing the racial and economic inequities in Baltimore City and throughout Maryland. The pandemic is exposing, opening up, revealing, uncovering the appalling health and educational conditions facing black and brown populations throughout the state. We talked about food insecurity, the anxiety around food, while others overstuff multiple freezers. The virus is opening up generations of greed, racism, injustice and cruelty, pain and human suffering all around us. We’ve been hearing about this for decades, but we refused to listen. We would not see, we would not care enough to see, would not love enough to know, because we preferred to keep covered.

One of our African-America congregations in East Baltimore had to let nearly all their staff go and they're struggling to pay their pastor. This is an *essential* ministry that's daily tending to the wounds, and needs, and fears of their community. The pastor said he's grateful for the support of the Presbytery and the prayers, but he said what he really needs are "white allies." He just needs to know that he's not alone, that someone is fighting the battle with him, praying for him and the work of that church. He's needs an advocate.

Yes, the Spirit of truth is moving through our churches and communities and nation, moving through the world today, opening us up to difficult truths we would rather ignore or just hope will fade away, evaporate before our eyes.

I was really disturbed, troubled by that conversation on Thursday. But do you know what? Those are the times when you know God is working on you, when your conscience is quickened and something opens up in you. When what was hidden steps out into the light, and the Spirit of truth seizes you, and in love moves you and wakes you up, and then compels you to care, to do something, even the seemingly impossible, to love and act because you *belong*—you belong—to the truth. "And if you abide in my word," Jesus said, "you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:31-32).



*The Belle Verrière Window (12th century), Chartres Cathedral of Chartres, France.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Erdman, "Truth in the Gospel of John: A summary of key *alētheia* passages useful for philosophical discussion." <http://theosproject.blogspot.com/2006/07/use-of-aletheia-in-gospel-of-john.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Roman philosophers later translated the Greek word *alētheia* as *veritas*. The Latin translation took on the meaning of "rightness" or being "correct," that which has been verified. The opposite of *veritas* is *falsum*, that which is false or incorrect. These different understandings of truth have led us into a maze of confusion over the past two thousand years. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) insisted on making a distinction between the Greek and Roman understanding of truth. See his seminal work, *Being and Time* (1927).

<sup>3</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Translated by G.R. Beasley-Murray, Gen. Ed., and R.W.N Hoare, and J.K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 606-607.