

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 19, 2024

Spirit of Truth

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Remember the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq by US forces? Remember the narrative, so prevalent in US media, that Saddam Hussein was stockpiling WMDs? Now, remember the report that came out by the head of the Pentagon and CIA's Iraq Survey Group, Charles Duelfler, on Oct 6, 2004 that "the group found no evidence that Iraq under Saddam Hussein had produced and stockpiled any weapons of mass destruction since 1991, when UN sanctions were imposed"¹? You don't remember that report? Odd. I wonder why that report didn't get the same coverage that the speculation over WMDs got beforehand. This is just one example of a repeated lie used to manufacture consent for what a government or special interest has already decided to do.

How about the myth around the McDonald's hot coffee lawsuit, *Liebeck v. McDonald's Restaurants*? For a long time that suit was synonymous with "frivolous" litigation. But if you know the details of the case, it wasn't frivolous at all. During discovery Liebeck's attorneys found that it was McDonald's policy to serve coffee at 180-190 degrees, 20 degrees hotter than most restaurants served it. They also discovered more than 700 other reports of people scalding themselves with McDonald's coffee. But with enough spin...twisting of the truth...by McDonald's PR firms, the narrative was somehow that Liebeck was a villainous opportunist...a 79-year-old woman who went into shock when the scalding hot coffee spilled on her was made out to be the bad guy.

We live in a culture of half-truths and outright lies. The forces of this world are ruthless in bending narratives to their own purposes. And this proclivity is nothing new. Remember the question Pilate asks of Jesus in John's Passion narrative? "What is truth?"² My how those words have echoed down through the centuries upon the lips of all sorts of powers and principalities. Why do people in power have such a

¹ *Comprehensive report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD* — Central Intelligence Agency. (n.d.). https://web.archive.org/web/20110202015810/https://www.cia.gov/library/reports/general-reports-1/iraq_wmd_2004/index.html#sect1

² John 18:38a (NRSVue)

hard time with this question? I suspect it's because deep down they know what the truth is, but protecting their power and influence is always and ever more important. Even if that means twisting the truth, or outright rejecting it. Better living through denial and delusion!

And it's not just those in power that are good at lies and delusion. You and I are just as prone to this phenomenon as well. I know I can be very good at shifting my perspective on something just enough to make it fit my preconceived notions. I'm also great at judging myself on my intentions while judging others on their actions; a particularly insidious means of self-deception. No wonder Christ promises us the "Spirit of Truth!" Once again, God knows what humanity needs, and God provides it for us!

Luther understood this gift of truth from God well. I've shared this portion of his Heidelberg Disputation before, and I'm sure I'll share it again in the future:

“Thesis 21: A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.”³

Now, in this context Luther is referring to salvation. A theologian of glory, in Luther's understanding, prefers human works over the suffering of Christ, the glory of God over the death of God on the cross, strength and power over weakness and humility, and in general, their imagined understanding of God over how God is actually revealed in the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To put this another way, God knows we need to be disabused of our self-delusional trust in our own abilities, power, wealth, works, and will. So God reveals the truth in Christ. But that truth is so strange to humanity that we ignore or twist it to be other than what it is.

God takes on human flesh and limitation, even human mortality by becoming Emmanuel, God-with-us. All in order to reveal God's values and priorities, to bring about God's Kingdom. A kingdom which serves the least and lowly, comforts the sick and dying, welcomes the stranger, meets all people's needs, and prioritizes connection and community. God interrupts our human cycles of violence, cycles predicated on self-delusions like the myth of scarcity and the myth of power. God shows us a different way to live, the way we were created to live, the Way of the Cross, the Way of Christ, the Way of Truth.

³ Luther, Martin. "Thesis 21 – Heidelberg Disputation." Book of Concord. 1518 CE.

This is an important, Festival Day. Pentecost is the birthday of the church. It is the start of a community of faith that is grounded on the teachings of Christ, grounded on the truth. Disciples dedicated to walking the Way of Christ and joining in God's creative and redemptive activity in the world. It is a wonderful day for us to be affirming and re-affirming the promises of baptism. Promises which include: "to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth."⁴ In the example of Jesus we see someone dedicated to the truth. The truth that we are created to live in certain ways, and the truth that on our own, we do not. We see in Jesus the truth that our self-delusion often results in harm to others and to Creation. The truth that the world still needs justice and peace, connection and community, love and grace.

This promise is followed by the powerful prayer for the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives as we attempt to keep these promises: "Stir up in us the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever."⁵ Wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and humility (which is what fear of the Lord is); all things necessary for seeing and knowing the truth. All things necessary for us to live righteously.

We should take this Festival Day as an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to the truth. And to being people of truth, guided by the Spirit of Truth. What does this look like? It starts with a compassionate curiosity. A desire to look at the world around us, seeing it for what it is: a terribly broken world, far removed from what God intended for Creation, yet a world God created, remains active in, and names "good."⁶ Seeing that hard and complicated truth, and the hard truth of our complicity in this broken world...in broken human systems. But seeing this truth with compassion and care. Not desiring to point fingers and cast blame, but with a heart and mind towards healing, wholeness, and reconciliation.

Unfortunately, this dedication to the truth will put us in opposition to the powers of the world. Just look at the response to the apostles in our Acts reading today. The followers of Christ, guided by the Spirit of Truth, speak the truth and are accused of being drunk! Saying something people don't want to hear? There **must** be something wrong with you! Then, if you persist in speaking truth, especially truth to power, those in power have proven to be willing, time and again, to respond with violence.

⁴ Evangelical Lutheran Worship, "*Affirmation in the Presence of the Assembly.*" page 236. Augsburg Fortress. 2006.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31 (NRSVue)

Remember our Gospel reading from last Sunday? The prayer in which Jesus asks the Father to protect his followers.⁷ The prayer that also asked that the followers be sanctified “in the truth.” No wonder Christ prays this for us, he knows well where the truth will often get you...the cross.

Yet this is still our calling. As followers of the Way we are to be guided by the Spirit of Truth. Guided in skepticism towards the world and the world’s priorities (thus avoiding a theology of glory). Guided in honesty towards the world by boldly calling evil what it is, evil (being grounded in a theology of the cross). This means calling out the sexist, racist, homophobic or transphobic joke or comment, even when its coming from a friend or family member. It means questioning the motives of people in power, as well as our own motives. It means asking “why?” more often and digging deeper into the world around us. It means acknowledging brokenness, while also working for healing. It means seeing in one another, the face of Christ, the beauty of the image of God. It means knowing and serving the **truth**...the **Word**...Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁷ John 17:11-15 (NRSVue)