

LISTENING TO YOUR HEART

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If you appear as a witness in a trial in a courtroom in the United States of America, you place your hand on the Bible, and you are asked this question: “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God”. And we all I think believe in our hearts that we know what the truth is, and can label it as such. But sometimes the truth and what we believe to be the truth is just a matter of perspective.

Every year in the Presbytery of Eastern Virginia, there is a twenty-four hour overnight clergy retreat for spiritual formation. And the person in charge of this year’s retreat was instructed to find a nice retreat center somewhere in the general area, and so he decided to contact two places on the other side of the James River. He was also told that our Executive Presbyter wanted to have a wine and cheese party for all of the clergy on the first evening, and so he had to find a place that would accommodate that.

First my minister friend called the Baptist retreat center on the other side of the James, and he said, “we’d like to have a wine and cheese party. Do you allow alcohol?” And they said, “No, absolutely not. We do not allow any alcohol.” So next he called up the Episcopal retreat center on the other side of the James. And he said, “Do you allow alcohol?” And they said, “No, absolutely no alcohol. We only allow wine and beer”. So you see sometimes the truth is just a matter of perspective.

This couple in the Scripture in the gospel of Luke who are on their way home to Emmaus from the city of Jerusalem, that’s a distance of about seven miles. They had a certain perspective of what was the truth that day of the resurrection. They were full of despair. They were depressed. They felt tremendous grief. They were carrying this overwhelming sense of finality and futility. They have an encounter on this road with the Risen Christ, but because of the state they are in, they do not recognize Him at all. And when he joins them, they say, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know what has happened here in the last few days, these things that have happened?” And Jesus says, “What things?”

And this is their version of the truth that they relay to Him. “Jesus of Nazareth,” they say, “who was a prophet mighty in word and deed before God and all of the people. He was crucified. And we had hoped that He was going to be the one who was going to redeem all of Israel.” Notice the past tense. “We had hoped.” And they went on to say that some women had had a vision of angels, who told them that Jesus was alive and that others of the disciples had gone to the tomb and found his body wasn’t there. But here is the operative phrase. “But they did not see Him.” And that is their truth at this moment. “They did not see Him.”

Douglas Sloane is an author who has written quite a bit on the state of higher education in America today. And he states that in American universities since the early nineteen

hundreds, quantifying thinking, that is thinking on subjects such as statistics, and physical matter of money, measurable things, this kind of quantifying thinking has reigned supreme. On the other hand, qualifiable thinking, which is study of thoughts, thoughts of things such as beauty, and right and wrong, ethics of good and bad, God, spirituality, this kind of qualifiable thinking has had a rough go of it.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus on this day are wrapped up in quantifiable, measuring thinking. They are thinking, “He lived, this man Jesus. He did great things. He was arrested. He was crucified after completely enraging the authorities. And now our hope is gone”. So this is it. This is what they see. The sky is blue. The road is dusty. The sun is setting. We are hungry, and we are so very tired. And Jesus responds to them at that moment. He says, “How foolish, and how slow of heart you are not to believe what the prophets had said so long ago.” When He’s saying this, He’s talking about the law of Moses, what we call the first five books of the Bible from Genesis to Deuteronomy, and all the writings of the prophets, prophesying the coming of the Messiah; Isaiah, Jeremiah, all of the smaller minor prophets, what is known today as the Hebrew Bible, and also the Old Testament. He explains all of this to them on the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

Then when dinner comes that evening, He agrees to eat with them. And He sits down with them, and they still don’t know who He is. And still He takes the loaf and He blesses it, and He breaks it, a clear reference to Holy Communion or The Lord’s Supper. And then He vanishes. And at that point, they say, “Were not our hearts burning within us when we were on the road, and He was telling us about the Scriptures?”

In the Bible and in the Christian tradition, the word heart has a distinct meaning. And it is quite different from the way we use the word ‘heart’ today. When we use the word ‘heart’ today, it’s usually one of two ways. The heart is first physically a muscle that pumps blood throughout your body; you cannot live without it. Or the heart is the seat of all emotions. We say when we meet that perfect person “I know in my heart he is the one for me”. For we also say, “My heart is filled with joy”. Or if we are in a very difficult place in life, we say “I am heartbroken”. In Scripture ‘heart’ is used differently. Heart is a metaphor for a deep, deep sense of the self. It describes a level of thinking, a level of being that is below thinking, it is below feeling, it is below and deeper than any action.

So unlike in today’s world, heart knowledge in the Bible is much deeper and more profound than head knowledge. Faith and ultimate truth in the Bible comes from the heart. It actually describes the deepest truth of the human soul. After this encounter with Jesus, the disciples’ perspective on the truth changed from the measurable truth; okay, Jesus lived, He died, He took our hopes and our dreams with Him when He died; to the immeasurable truth that if Christ is risen, our hope is not gone. Our hope is only beginning.

The same sort of thing happened in Acts, the second passage we read, after the crowds had heard Peter’s powerful sermon. And do you remember that this is the same Peter that is preaching this amazing sermon, the same Peter who denied Jesus three times the evening of this arrest, denied that he even knew Him. And then when the Holy Spirit came at

Pentecost, Peter stood up and he began to preach boldly. And the Scripture says when the people heard what Peter was preaching, they were cut to the heart. “What should we do?” they said. And he said, “Repent and be baptized and give your lives to Christ.” At the very deepest level of their being, they had been transformed, and what they define as the truth has completely changed.

Now on any given Sunday, we modern disciples come walking through that door, and we seat ourselves in this sanctuary. And we are caring, most of us, some pretty heavy baggage. We loaded up with cynicism. We are loaded up with stress. We are loaded up with feelings that we have, and we must have power. We are loaded up with doubt. We are a sophisticated bunch, this group here, that worships regularly together in this church. We are engineers, we are scientists, we are mathematicians, and teachers, and doctors, and artists. We are organizers, administrators. We are business men and women. We are experienced with the tangible, measurable ways of the world. But if the truth be told, we are just a little bit less comfortable with the realm of the spirit.

Now we speak easily often of truth, and facts, and money and things and experiences we’ve had. But we often find that our hearts, our very true selves according to the Scripture, are running on empty. So we may find it very easy to talk about God or to listen to other people talk about God, but we do not always recognize and acknowledge the Living Christ, who is in our midst.

This is the third Sunday of the Easter season. It is two weeks after our celebration of the resurrection that Easter Day with all the wonderful music and the brass accompaniment. But today in this Scripture from Luke, the promise of God is complete. We know here that Jesus died for us, that through his resurrection, we have been given the gift of new life. But also today, we know that Christ is not just waiting for us in some far off place that we call heaven, and that we will know only when death comes. We have today in this Scripture the promise that the spirit of the Living Christ journeys with us through every day of our lives from birth until death, and through all the days of joy and sorrow and indifference in between.

Christ meets us on the road where we all are, and if you listen to your heart, to your real heart today, you will know that this is the truth. Thanks be to God. Amen.

SCRIPTURE LESSON: LUKE 24:13-25; ACTS 2:24A, 36-41
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