

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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The Spirit of Truth

But when the Helper comes, the Spirit of the Truth, she will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is. She* won't draw attention to herself*, but will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I have done and said. – John 15:26-16:15* (paraphrased – the use of feminine pronouns marked by the asterisk is intended to draw attention to how God is beyond both male and female)

I never quite know how some things make the news, but this week, apparently one of the biggest stories was a very brief recording of a voice saying a single word. Some people on hearing this recording, clearly heard the word “Laurel,” while others clearly hear a name “Yanni.” I heard the recording twice, and once I heard Yanni and the other time I heard Laurel. Apparently, it makes a difference what kind of speakers you hear it through and what frequency range the speakers have. But even people listening to the same set of speakers, in the same room, at the same time, often hear the word differently. It makes a difference what frequencies you hear best, and how your brain interprets those frequencies.

Beauty, it is said, is in the eye of the beholder. That little news item seems to suggest that that truth is also in the ear of the beholder. When it comes to Laurel or Yanni, there is no objective truth. Everything is relative. Or is it? Let me come back to that.

The idea that truth is relative can be a dangerous notion. Perhaps nothing has brought it more to the fore than the phrase “Fake news.” Over the past couple of years “Fake News” has become a ubiquitous part of our language. Our neighbour Mr. Trump likes to pick and choose what he believes, and brand any report that he finds inconvenient as “fake news,” even if it is well-documented and well-supported. He even has managed to cast doubt on some of the most reputable news organizations in the country, organizations that rigorously fact check every piece of information they pass on. The way that President Trump demonizes news he disagrees with is very troubling.

It is more than troubling. It is dangerous, because when a leader can use the power of his office to ignore, dispute and twist the truth, something basic to democracy is undermined. Timothy Snyder, in a book entitled *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from*

the Twentieth Century, points out that "To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle." (quoted in Clinton, *What Happened*, 9) But Republican strategist Karl Rove, famously once said that "we're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality." (quoted in Clinton, 9) But whether the U.S. is an empire does not change reality. Imperial action can obscure truth, but not create reality, nor change it.

In its "Four Way Test," the Rotary Club, the world's largest service club, offers a basic test of ethical practice for its members, consisting of four simple questions. The first of those four questions asks, simply, "Is it the truth?" That simple question makes it clear that the first test of ethical living to discipline ourselves by the truth, not to define the truth by whether it is convenient to us. As another American politician once said, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts." [Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, quoted in Clinton, 8]

And, it turns out, that while some people hear Laurel and others hear Yanni, the recording that made the news this week comes from an online dictionary, and the opera singer who made the recording that was in the news this week, intended his recording to accompany the Dictionary.com entry for the word "Laurel." So, while I was speaking the truth when I said I heard "Yanni," the truth about which word it is, is not entirely according to the hearer.

That commitment to the truth is not just important in politics and in ethical living, but it is also important in the life of faith. Sometimes people understand faith in a narrow way, as if to have faith in God means to reject science or other religions or what other people believe to be true. But faith in God cannot mean the rejection of any truth from any source. Because any God worthy of the name, any God who is the creative source of all that is, any God that is love itself, being itself, the Alpha and Omega from whom all things come and to whom all things will one day return, any God worthy of devoting our lives to, any God worthy of worship, is one from whom all truth ultimately comes, and to whom all truth ultimately points, and that means that true faith in him cannot be a narrow faith. A narrow faith points to a partial truth. The fullness of truth has a depth and a complexity that is often express through the language of metaphor, poetry and paradox. And such language is not easy to understand. It may, in fact, reveal its meaning only after years of contemplation and life experience. The language of faith is different from the language of science, for example. Science is about knowledge and control, and Faith is about how to live a wise human life. Both are true, but in very different ways.

Imagine with me that you are present at Jesus' last supper. He knows that this is his last supper, and you are slowly realizing it as well. Tonight, he will be captured and tomorrow he will be put to death for his unwavering commitment to justice and truth. He is saying goodbye to you. This person who opened the prison cell of your life and served as your guide to a world full of freedom and light and colour and beauty and joy, this person who captivated you with his stories and called you to a life of significance and meaning, this person for whom you left everything, this person who is your sun and stars, your 'North, your South, your East and West, your working week and your Sunday rest,'¹ this person who is the epicenter of your life – he is going away. It is as if everyone and everything precious to you were about to be suddenly lost in a tornado or a fire. It is as if you are about to be totally alone.

But you will not be alone, he is saying, he will send you his Spirit as a helper. And this helper is the Spirit of Truth. The Spirit of Truth is Jesus' presence within you, and he will lead you into all truth, and all truth will lead you to him. You do not need to sacrifice any aspect of truth, wherever it may come from, to follow him, because all truth is from him and all truth ultimately leads back to him.

When we follow that Spirit, we who live even long after Jesus has gone away, we too can discover what those first disciples discovered, that the prison cells of our lives have opened to a whole world of life and joy and beauty and freedom; we too can find ourselves called to a life of significance in which we are appointed as nothing less than his ambassadors, agents of love and peace and justice in this world. There is no higher calling than that. No president or prime minister or celebrity has any more important calling than that.

This Spirit is within you. The Spirit does not chase you down from outside like a calf roper at a rodeo and force you to do what it wants. The Spirit is within you, the still, small voice of conscience and imagination that can easily be overlooked and ignored. But this Spirit is not satisfied to force you to do something you don't want to do. This Spirit will settle for nothing less than for you to want what it wants, to mourn what it mourns, to love what it loves.

In the same way, a church attentive to that Spirit will not force itself on you. We will not insist that you attend regularly or nag you if you don't. We hope that you do attend regularly, and if you don't, I hope that you will often hear from people that you are missed. But we will not nag you or lay guilt trips on you. Frankly, it is easy to be spiritually lazy in this church, it is easy to go with the flow, to drift with

¹ paraphrased from the poem "Funeral Blues" by W. H. Auden.

the easiest and least demanding. But the very space that allows you to be lazy is also the flexibility to be creative and responsive to the Spirit's leading. We will not give you easy answers or tell you exactly how to follow Jesus, because doing that would prevent you from really seeking the Spirit's leading for yourself.

We hope that your attention to the Spirit of Truth will help you to be a leader in your family, in your community, in your schools and workplace, and in the church. We hope that you will keep challenging yourself, keep learning and growing, keep responding to your compassion, your intuition, your conviction about truth and justice and integrity. There is a lot you aren't ready for yet, says Jesus, but the Spirit of Truth will keep revealing herself to you, keep revealing God to you.

In coming here today, you have opened yourself to the Spirit of God. Whether this is your first time here or your thousandth, you have connected yourself with a community that seeks to follow Jesus' way. This is not the end of your journey, however, but only one significant stage in it. This is a significant step, but there are many more choices to be made. You will not be alone as you make those choices. The Spirit of Truth will be with you. Listen for that spirit; pay attention, and you will find a sure guide on your own quest for the truth. Amen!