

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, JANUARY 31, 2020

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

FOURTH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: We come from different places, different homes and families.
All: We come to listen and learn, to pray and offer praises to you, O God.
One: We are grateful that we can gather together to worship you, our Lord and our God.
All: Focus us on our time together. Open up our hearts and minds that we might hear you speak to us, and in hearing, that we might respond with grace in gratitude.
One: Let us worship God.

***OPENING HYMN “In an Age of Twisted Values” GtG 345**

One: In an age of twisted values
All: we have lost the truth we need.
One: In sophisticated language
All: we have justified our greed.
One: By our struggle for possessions
All: we have robbed the poor and weak.
One: Hear our cry and heal our nation;
All: your forgiveness, Lord, we seek.

One: We have built discrimination
on our prejudice and fear.
**All: Hatred swiftly turns to cruelty
if we hold resentments dear.**
One: For communities divided
by the walls of class and race,
**All: hear our cry and heal our nation;
show us, Lord, your love and grace.**

One: When our families are broken,
All: when our homes are full of strife,
One: when our children are bewildered,
All: when they lose their way in life,
One: when we fail to give the aged
all the care we know they need,
All: hear our cry and heal our nation;
help us show more love, we plead.

One: We who hear your word so often
choose so rarely to obey.
All: Turn us from our willful wandering;
give us truth to light our way.
One: In the power of your Spirit
come to cleanse us, make us new;
All: hear our cry and heal our nation
till our nation honors you.

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Forgive us, gracious God, for we have distorted your word.
We assume we know your message without careful listening.
We presume to speak your word without discerning the Spirit.
We do not recognize your voice among the competing claims of our day.
We follow pseudo-gods we create.
We engage in habits that destroy.
We hold on to prejudices that divide.
Forgive us, gracious God.
Lead us, make us new, and speak to us again.
Remove our desire to heed false prophets,
and show us your way.
In the name of the One who is your way, we pray. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: The One who made us and knows our every thought,
pardons and strengthens all who return to God.
All: The God who hears us now, heals us now,
and forgives us all our sin.
One: We have been redeemed through Jesus Christ,
God's Son, our Savior,
All: and in him we are renewed and restored.
Thanks be to God!

***THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SCRIPTURE READINGS Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Mark 1:21-28

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹⁵ *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me [Moses] from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.* ¹⁶ *This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: “If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.”* ¹⁷ *Then the Lord replied to me: “They are right in what they have said.* ¹⁸ *I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.* ¹⁹ *Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.* ²⁰ *But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.”*

Mark 1:21-28 (New Revised Standard Version+)

²¹ *They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught.* ²² *They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.* ²³ *Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,* ²⁴ *and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”* ²⁵ *But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”* ²⁶ *And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.* ²⁷ *They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”* ²⁸ *At once the news about him spread throughout the entire region of Galilee.*

SERMON “How True?!” by Pastor Bill Vincent

In 1970, the rock opera “Jesus Christ Superstar” (Andrew Lloyd Webber) burst upon the scene. It provided a new perspective on what many had assumed were settled truths. In the scene of the “Trial Before Pilate,” the character of Jesus says,

I look for truth and find that I get damned

To which the Pilate character responds,

But what is truth? Is truth unchanging law?

We both have truths—are mine the same as yours?

Somehow I doubt that.

It raises the question: How do you discern the false from the true?

That’s not a new question.

It’s not solely an old question.

It, in some ways, is a timeless question, one with which we constantly wrestle.

-Our Deuteronomy passage we read raises the question, at least implicitly. Though in the words immediately following, Moses himself raises the question,

You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?” (Deuteronomy 18:21-NRSV)

-The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Galatia, chides them about “*turning to a different gospel,*” “*a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed,*” “*another gospel [that] pervert[s] the gospel of Christ.*” (Galatians 1:6,7,8-NRSV)

-And in a day in which the term “fake news” is used to label anything we disagree with or find distasteful, how do we cut through the chatter and the noise, and discover the real?

To begin with, our passage in Deuteronomy begins to suggest an answer. After speaking about a prophet “like Moses,” Moses asks the implied question, “*How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?*” And then Moses provides an answer:

If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. (Deuteronomy 18:22- NRSV)

The test of time. The test of history. If what is said by the prophet does not come to pass, then you know the word of that prophet was not true.

Of course, the test of time takes time and can be difficult to pin down. It’s a “retroactive” test: looking back in time.

But elsewhere in Deuteronomy (and other places in scripture), another test is provided: consistency. Consistency with the words of other prophets, consistency with the words of Moses, consistency with other words known to be words of the Lord and hence known to be true. If a prophet speaks a word that is not consistent with other words known to be words of the Lord, then that prophet’s word is false.

Fast forward several centuries.

An itinerant preacher enters a synagogue and begins to teach the people. The people are astounded: “He speaks with authority!”

His words passed the test of time: they came to pass, in his life and beyond.

His words proved to be consistent with the words from Moses and the prophets, more so than any other.

He spoke “with authority.” Somehow the people recognized the ring of truth in what he said.

And if the people recognized that Jesus spoke “with authority,” does that not suggest that we ourselves need to pay attention to him? That in him we hear the truth, hear God’s word, and so can discern false from true.

Remember last week? Jesus begins his ministry saying, “Repent.” To repent is to turn toward God and God’s way.

Maybe this question about truth and falsehood is precisely why Jesus started his ministry with the call to repentance.

It is only by sincerely turning toward God and desiring God’s way that we might be able to hear God’s word and discern God’s truth.

Not my way. Not my truth. Not my word.

But God’s.

And that approach of repentance requires humility. To give up my way. To seek Another’s way.

Humility: what some would describe as a deep and vulnerable honesty about who I am.

Some would smear humility by calling it weak, lacking confidence. But you can be confident and humble at the same time.

But you cannot be humble and arrogant at the same time.

Arrogance dismisses the other. Arrogance asserts the superiority of its own view and perspective. Arrogance forces its way upon others. Arrogance is ultimately centered on the particular self (and like-minded selves).

Whereas humility values the other.

Humility invites.

Last week we recalled the call of the first disciples. Jesus called them, with a voice of authority, yes. But he did not demand. He invited. He was not arrogant in his call.

Humility invites, valuing the other.

And most of all (from our perspective), humility takes me off of center stage; takes the focus off of me.

Humility. Arrogance.

Which approach do you think best describes the witness to Jesus Christ? Which approach do you think best aligns with the witness of Jesus Christ? – He who came not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45).

Jesus – this one we’re supposed to pay attention to – also said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*” (John 14:6-NRSV)

I have my doubts, when Jesus says “*I am the way, the truth, and the life*” that he means he is the principles and statutes that state and define the truth. “Principles A, B, and C; statutes D, E, and F; and here’s the list.”

I believe more that, it is in knowing him and relating to him and growing in relationship with him, that we grow into the truth about him, and therefore the truth about us, about God, about life.

It is in knowing Jesus for who he really is that he are able to hear his word and hence able to discern God's word and able to distinguish God's word from that which is not.

Now I realize that saying "I know Jesus and his word" is easy and not a sufficient demonstration of the truth of knowing Jesus and his word. But if my words and deeds are consistent and in concert with Jesus' words and deeds and life, that *is* a sufficient demonstration of the truth of knowing Jesus and his word.

And let me just say that when we look to the witness to Jesus Christ by others and the witness of Jesus Christ about himself, a picture begins to emerge that provides for us a certain clarity about some things which are definitely inconsistent with that portrait and the truth we know in him.

We've spoken already about arrogance and its inconsistency with the portrait of Christ.

I mention briefly another that seems particularly relevant: violence.

When some beat down a store front door and burn it to the ground, when some try to beat down the doors of the Capitol (Washington, D.C.), when one beats a spouse behind closed doors, this is in no way consistent with the portrait of one who said, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

That's overt violence.

Then there is covert violence – implicit, subtle, but just as hurtful: when our culture seeks to de-value and de-humanize, dismiss and disenfranchise various groups (or types) of people. Systemic oppression and injustice – racism, sexism, ageism – tear people from full inclusion and participation in a community that is supposed to give life.

If we seek Jesus' truth, if we yearn to walk in his truth, then we must turn from these aberrations of the truth and seek to walk a different way.

John C. Holbert (Lois Craddock Perkins Professor Emeritus of Homiletics, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas TX) reaches back to Deuteronomy and forward to Jesus, when he writes,

A true prophet's words must be matched by deeds. If love is the central criterion for relationships between humanity and God, between humans and other humans, and between all parts of God's creation, then true prophets are those who speak and live such realities. ...when love controls and guides the words and actions of a prophet, we may be certain that in the long arc of history love will win, and God's will for all will be revealed. To speak otherwise is to speak falsely, for this [love] is the ultimate will of our God.
(Connections-215b)

And then he gets more specific:

To suggest that any peoples are outside of that promise of divine love, to claim that anyone is superior to anyone else because of status or wealth or power, is to speak in the name of other gods, not in the name of...the God of Jesus [Christ]. (Connections-215b-216)

Who am I to tell you what is, or is not, the truth?
Maybe I can't.
But I can point to the One who is the truth, who shares that truth.
I can point with the words I speak and the choices I make and the life I live.
And you can, too.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**We trust in Jesus Christ,
fully human, fully God.
Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:
preaching good news to the poor
and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed
and blessing the children,
healing the sick
and binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts,
forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.**

**In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.**

**In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: Hear us, O God.
People: **Your mercy is great.**

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Contemporary)*

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Most merciful and gracious God, all that we have is a gift of your grace.
You call us, you name us, you watch over us with care. We offer now our
gifts in response to your goodness. Use them and us for good wherever there
is need, in the name of all that you have first given us, especially Christ Jesus,
your Son, our Savior. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Be Thou My Vision” GtG 450

One: Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
All: naught be all else to me, save that thou art;
One: thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping,
All: thy presence my light.

One: Be thou my wisdom,
All: and thou my true Word;
One: I ever with thee
All: and thou with me, Lord;
One: thou my soul's shelter, and thou my high tower;
All: raise thou me heavenward, O Power of my power.

One: Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise;
All: thou, mine inheritance, now and always;
One: thou and thou only, first in my heart,
All: High King of Heaven, my treasure thou art.

One: High King of Heaven, my victory won,
All: may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
One: Heart of my own heart,
All: whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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