

A SERMON PREACHED AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
BETHANY BEACH, DE, ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2017

A farmer in Bloomington bought a horse, and was told, honestly, by the seller that the horse had one fault: he liked to sit on avocados. The farmer said, "well that's alright; there aren't any avocados around here." So, he put down his money, mounted the horse and started home. On the way they had to cross a stream. In the middle the horse sat down and would not budge. The farmer walked back to the horse dealer and explained what happened. "Well now you never said nothin' about water, so I didn't tell you." The farmer said, "Didn't tell me what?" The horseman explained, "If he can't get avocados, he sits on fish."ⁱ

Ah, the truth will set you free, or so the bible infers. In the gospel reading for today, during a dispute over whose children Jesus' opponents are, we find a very convoluted set of arguments about family relations and the truth that sets people free from sin. To understand the passage, we'll need to look both at the nature of sin and the reality of truth. What is implied in Jesus speech to those around him is that their sinfulness had caged them and made them slaves to sin. If sin is that which gets in the way of our vision of God, if it keeps us from seeing God and knowing who God is for us and to others, then what words of truth will break down the barriers so that we have an unencumbered vista, and hence, a right relationship, with God? Will proclaiming our love for God do it (and what good is a proclamation if we do not have the actions to back it up)? Will telling our story and how we came to faith do it (as the tale of the journey itself might contain forceful revelations that will break open the kingdom of God)? Will bits and pieces of prayer, gathered from our sufferings and elations over the years tip the balance in favor of righteousness, allowing justice to speak its Word?

I like the idea that words of truth, our own truths at that, might bring us into a closer relationship with God? What are those words, and how might using them do what we intend? Of course, love is one. If we say we love God and our neighbor, and if we act upon that truth, the world would be a much better place. Justice is another; if we seek to do what is just, then righteousness (another good word) would prevail. Mercy is a great word, as is grace. Rarely are we in the situation to use them (nor do we possess the authority or power), but they are God language, and when we consider them we are living and acting in God's realm, a place we strive often to be. Forgiveness is crucial (in the very essence of the word), as in most cases truth cannot survive unless we are forgiven for what robbed us of truth in the first place. (So certainly repentance will have to have a role to play in the whole schema as well.) Fear, pride, vanity and, ego will be spoken in the same context of truth, and in recent years we have learned the insidious meaning of "fake," which seems to appear in just about every news story with alarming alacrity, despite an accompanying overwhelmingly negativity that sneaks through and lets one know there is a "but better beware" lurking somewhere around the corner.

Of course the two words from the mouth of God that God uses to describe the Divine Essence are “I am.” We have probably never thought that each time we utter those two words we are making a theological statement. “I am” means that I am one with the Creator and that I too participate daily in the ongoing acts of creation. We need to be reminded how powerful we really are, each one of us, and how we have the ability to make or destroy things around us, from the seemingly inconsequential to the greatest of works (hence my fear regarding who can put their hands on that nuclear button). And we need to understand that words matter, which is why as good stewards of the created order we should choose our words carefully. Years ago the United Methodist Church put out a paper called *Words That Hurt, Words that Heal* as a reminder and a study guide for churchgoers seeking to emulate Christ in their daily lives. I don’t have to tell you about the negative words that hurt; we’ve all used them, sometimes (and I pray) most often unwittingly, so I won’t elucidate them here. I was really interested in the words that heal, and likewise pray that they can become a regular part of our vocabulary; I would go so far as to say I think they are words God would like us to use, sacred words to be certain, words like Unity, Trinity, Wholeness, Numinous, Community, Beloved, Refresh, Light, Transformative, Transfiguration, Aid, Welcoming, and Refuge (there are many more, but these stand out in my mind as I wrote this...). Try working one of these words into your conversation at lunch or while driving with your spouse or in a conversation with your children or your mother. You’ll probably get a strange response (like, “why did you just use that word?”), and a good answer is “because I was thinking of you and wanting to be close to you.” I’m all for healing, and whatever words we can employ that will help bring it to the fore, well, I say, *let’s use them!*

I began this thought process with asking you to reflect on the way Jesus speaks of truth and freedom as spiritual realities known through his word. So I guess I should spend a few minutes talking about the freedom that comes from knowing Christ. *Freedom* is really a strange word to speak of when describing a relationship. Most of us would be hard pressed to say that knowing an individual or being part of their lives (and they part of ours) has set us free. That could be because many of us do not see the ways in which we are oppressed by our current lifestyle. Or maybe we see things all too clearly and would rather steer the conversation elsewhere. Whichever the case, the question for confessing Christians is how does knowing Christ in any way set us free? Allow me to speak from personal experience, if you will. There have been many people in my spiritual journey who have questioned whether I can call myself a Christian, probably due to my outrageous belief that in Christ, all things are possible. While I admit that my belief system about church polity and biblical and historic accuracy has put me often at odds with authority figures, I can sincerely say that all I’ve tried to do in the past 35 years as a minister is pastor to others and make them feel as though they were always welcome, regardless of what they have done or who they have loved or how much money they have or what they have to offer either the church or me personally. I’ve always believed that God is the

aggressor in our relationship with the Divine, and that means that God, and through the extension of God's greatest gift, the church, is the one who must offer relief, read *freedom* to all who ask for it or desire it. And I believe that if in Christ all things are possible, then I am possible, imperfect and wanting as I am, yet perfectly wanting and ready to serve and to tell you how much God loves you and cares for you and wishes that you will someday find the perfect freedom of wholeness. Whether it be now or in eternal health with God is up to you. But friends, a great gift is being offered to us daily, and it is so sad to ignore it. God has called us together in community, so we should waste no time seeking to embrace one another and unite in the bonds of our joint legacy as believers in the Word. Every time the Word of God is spoken, every time it is present among us is for our healing, our freedom, our truth. That is why folks were attracted to Jesus in his day, because he spoke in language and in ways that folks had never heard before, so much so that they asked themselves and each other, "who is this man who speaks so confidently and with such authority?" And they followed him wherever he went because they wanted "it," they wanted "more," they wanted "what he had." We can have it all, it is but for the asking, and in the doing, and in using the correct vocabulary. We need to stand at the door and knock and be willing to walk through it into God's kingdom. But we need to know the language, and that is what I hope we can learn together as we begin our 16th year in God's service and witness to those around us.

In the end, St. Paul tells us, it comes down to justification by faith, a phrase we need to know if only for the sake of understanding where we stand in our relationship with God. If we live by our faith and it guides who we are and how we act/react to others, it's important that we understand how it alone is enough to put us on good standing with God. St. James, contrary to Paul, says that faith without works is dead. In other words if we are not able to follow through and put our money where our mouth is regarding what we believe, placing it into action, then we are not true believers. Paul, however, goes all in on faith alone, implying that because God desires a relationship with us all we need to do is say yes, with no further proofs, and it will be as God commands. What difference does this make? In those times when we most need to be heard by God, we do not want to have to burn a candle or offer a sacrifice or say a rosary: there may not be time for that, especially if we are on the battlefield or on a sinking ship. The covenant relationship we have with God, made once, and for all, and made real in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ should be all that is necessary. God extends an invitation, we respond, and our yes is God's yes back to us. Therefore we should never hesitate to call upon God, for God's mercy is sure, and the covenant made long ago and that we confirm in our baptism and each time we take communion is all sufficient to manage whatever comes our way. Those who are able to give it up and give it over to God, as ritualistic as it may seem, are much happier than those who hold their cares and keep them to themselves. I'm all for an open relationship with God; it makes life simpler and more cheerful. And in the end it keeps us both humble and satisfied; what more can one ask?

I'd like to end my thoughts this morning with a story that illustrates the value of works vs. faith. Perhaps it will inspire you. There once was a painter who was hired to paint the exterior of a church. His practice was to thin the paint so that he could make a larger profit. As he was painting the church a torrential rain began to fall and it washed all of the paint off. Then, as quickly as the rain began, it ended, and the sun came out. As the painter gazed skyward, he heard a voice from above saying: "Repaint ! Go, and thin no more."ⁱⁱ

Whatever it takes, make good your relationship with God and God's creation. The whole world is waiting for your next move.

Amen.

(The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.

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ⁱ Hodgkin, Michael. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking*.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.smilegodlovesyou.org/jokes.church.html>