

Love or Truth

John 17:6-19; Acts 1:1-11

Whitefish UMC

Ascension Sunday, May 24, 2009

- † It's Memorial Day weekend. It's also Ascension Sunday. We're so much more familiar with the first. Memorial Day traditionally marks the beginning of summer. I can't help it that one of my first thoughts of Memorial Day concerns my grandmother, who told me that I could only wear white shoes after that particular day—and had to put them away after Labor Day three months later.
- † Cookouts, barbeques, planting flowers, camping—these are things we do on Memorial Day weekend. When I was a little girl in Chicago, it was also the time we Girl Scouts marched in the Memorial Day parade and my grandpa wore his World War I infantry cap.
- † But when it comes to this time of year, I wonder if, just as it is at Christmastime, we've forgotten the reason for the season. My grandparents always called Memorial Day "Decoration Day," the day when the graves of the war dead would be cleaned up and decorated by family and fellow citizens.
- † In England, Memorial Day's equivalent is called Remembrance Day. Everyone wears red poppies, symbols of the poppies in Flanders Field, where so many soldiers who fought in the first World War are buried.
- † In England, in every church in the land, people stand and hold a minute of silence in remembrance. And the famous words of the poet Nicholas Binyon are read:

They shall not grow old
as we that are left grow old.
Age shall not weary them,
nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun,
and in the morning,
we shall remember them.

- † Given a choice, most of us would rather say “hello” than “good-bye.” That was certainly true for the disciples. The reading from Acts tells us that the disciples had to say good-bye to Jesus twice. Once, at the cross. Again at the day that we call the Ascension.
- † We’re here at the last Sunday of the season of Easter. Luke, writing in Acts, tells us that for forty days the risen Jesus appeared among the people, eating with them, explaining the scriptures, helping them and giving them instructions. Then without any notice, Jesus is taken up to heaven to sit at the right hand of God.
- † And the followers of Jesus are left stunned once again, looking up, and wondering what will come next and what will become of them.
- † Have you ever wondered why Jesus didn’t just stay? Why not stick around? Having won his victory over death itself, why not celebrate this by proving to the world, through his own physical availability, that he is alive and that good, gospel news he had been preaching all along really is the truth for all people?
- † Why leave it up to the disciples, who had demonstrated time and time again how feckless and frail they could be in their faith and their action? Maybe part of the answer lies in the notion that ascending

quietly and unexpectedly into heaven forty days after the resurrection is just so like the Jesus we have come to know and love.

- † All along in his life and ministry, Jesus took the road less traveled. He preferred the edges of society over the courts of power and influence. He kept company with beggars and the outcast more often than with movers and shakers. He spoke in parables that teased people into seeing the truth rather than stating it without room for questioning.
- † And so it is consistent with his life and ministry that Jesus leaves the work he began to us. The truth of the kingdom of God that he proclaimed in his words and actions will be proven, then, not by cosmic demonstrations of bolts of lightening or fiery explosions, but by his love made tangible in our love.
- † It's a good thing, though, that he doesn't leave us to our own devices. In the reading from John's gospel for today, we continue with Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples. Only now his instructions shift shape. Jesus begins to pray to his Abba, his Father, for his disciples, who he will leave behind.
- † The disciples world was about to be turned upside down. But Jesus tells them not to worry, before turning to God in prayer, asking that they will be protected, entrusting them, all of us who would follow, into God's care.
- † Jesus asks that they will be one, that they will be made holy. More than that, he asks that they will experience joy. We talked about what that joy looks and feels like last week.
- † Jesus prays that we will trust, abide in him, love, be holy, know joy. What if we were to remember that Jesus prays for our community,

our church? As Karl Barth says, “Jesus is bold enough to hold God to God’s promises: You have given, you have sent, you have loved; now keep, sanctify, let them be one—as he and the Father are one.”

- † And so the disciples were in an in-between time, and so are we. Change can bring anxiety, we know. There is a time for decision, and a time for trust. And yet Jesus reassures us that other faithful people have gone before us. When we are going through loss, change, and uncertainty, we can take heart when we remember that we have one another to love, the assurance of the Word, and comfort of knowing that we are a community for whom Jesus prays.
- † Sometimes this reassurance gives us the strength just to hold on. And sometimes it gives us the courage to speak the truth, even when it gets us in trouble. But above all, it gives us the ability to love, even when some will say we err on the side of love.
- † You may have read about the pastors and others who appeared before the Kalispell City Council to protest the gathering of gay and lesbian citizens and visitors that is set to occur in June. Last Friday I received a petition sent from the Whitefish Ministerial Association to all pastors in our town, asking that they mobilize their congregations against this event.
- † While urging that Christians not be mean or nasty to those gathering for the event, the letter and petition asserted that the truth of Christian opposition to various sexual sins be publicly stated.
- † After three days of prayer, I wrote back to the ministerial association expressing my sadness over the petition. In particular, I mourn that pastors and congregations are being urged to focus on this event rather than the many needs of our community, especially in these

hard economic times. (A copy of my letter is available, if you'd like to see it.)

- † Of course, I received responses disagreeing with my letter. Both responses admonished me for choosing love over truth. For the writers, scriptural truth, mostly from the Old Testament, takes precedence over love. The responses from pastors disagreeing with me were respectful.
- † But I could almost hear them say, “There she goes again. She just doesn’t get it, and that’s why we won’t let her pray in public at our events.”
- † Jesus’ prayer for his disciples, as I understand it, is about making choices. In it, he speaks especially of making them and us holy in the truth, in God’s word. We must, it seems, be truth tellers and doers of Jesus’ truth.
- † So are my brother pastors right to correct me? I wish I could say for sure. But one thing I do know. Jesus has spent his life erring on the side of love. And that is his truth. If you’ve been in church these last few weeks, you know that our gospel lessons and our reflections have centered on Jesus’ command that we love one another.
- † The world bombards us with so many images and concepts about what it means to love. Sometimes loving does mean telling truth to power. And I think my brother pastors genuinely believe that they are doing that.
- † Do we have to choose between love and truth? Sometimes, yes. But if we allow ourselves to draw closely and deeply into relationship with the living Christ, we’ll find the lines between the two increasingly blurred.

- † We live in the world, and God loves the world. But we are somehow set apart within it, for God’s special purpose. We live in a tension between gathering as a set-apart community and being a community that is sent into the world.
- † It’s tempting, isn’t it, to create a little world for ourselves, especially inside the church, where we can take refuge from the world. Thomas Troeger describes the temptation the earliest Christians had in common with us. “How good it would feel to retreat into their own group, recall the stories of Jesus, to sense his presence in their meals of bread and wine.
- † How good it would feel to enjoy each others’ supportive fellowship, and to no longer have to defend their beliefs and practices to a hostile world.” Sometimes we just get too exhausted with all the needs of the world, the ideological battles, the violence, the corruption, and our despair over the inability to make a difference.
- † N Graham Standish tells us that the way of the world has led us away from the streams that refresh our spirits. Christians ought to ask, he says, “Who are we serving, God or something else?” He continues, “the Christian faith calls on us to live a radically different kind of life: a life with Christ as the balancing fulcrum.
- † It calls on us to live a life rooted in the values of **God’s** world—**God’s** kingdom—and not those of the conventional world. On that narrow path, we will have to make choices, prioritize, and at the center choose those things that should be at our center...of the kind of life that leads to a commitment to Christ, compassion for others, and communion with God.”

- † As Kate Huey says, “The choices are hard when all around us the world tries to lure us off the narrow path; but we need not fear: we are a community that Jesus prays for, a set apart community that nevertheless loves the world that God loves, a people sent into the world to love and serve God and everything and everyone that God loves.”
- † On this Memorial Day Sunday, Ascension Sunday, will you ponder the choices you make for truth and for love. May they somehow become one and the same for you, as they were for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
- † The American poet Galway Kinnell writes a contemporary interpretation of what might be Jesus’ prayer for us. I close with it here, in part.

If I die before you
which is all but certain
then in the moment
before you will see me
become someone dead
in a transformation
as quick as a shooting star’s
I will cross over into you
and ask you to carry
not only your own memories
but mine too until you
too lie down....

† We carry the memory of Christ in us, the memory of his truth, which is indeed love. On this Memorial Day Sunday, as we remember those who have given so much of their love, their lives for us, may we carry Christ's sacrificial love as our truth.

† Amen.

Sources:

Kate Huey, "Weekly Seeds," <http://i.ucc.org>

Calum MacCleod, "Chosen," <http://fourthchurch.org>

<http://cep.calvinseminary.edu>