

Sermon: Hedging Not on the Truth
Scripture: Acts 7: 55-60; John 14:1-14
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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What is it about a man, like Stephen, that would lead him to believe that something is the truth so deeply that he would prefer to offer up his life than to betray it? It was not a matter of his believing something so much that he was willing to kill or be killed for it, like a soldier for his country or like a suicide bomber for his faith, but rather Stephen believed something so deeply that he gave up and sacrificed his life and like his Lord Jesus, forgave his executioners. What is it that leads to that kind of belief, that kind of faith?

There has been this good movement in the Western modern world, which is the effect of the Gospels on our consciousness, towards tolerance and pluralism that has led us to greater empathy and justice for all people, especially those different from ourselves. But accompanying this movement has been a sort of creeping relativism into the western consciousness which some have come to believe is necessary in order to be tolerant and broad-minded. There is a reluctance in certain quarters to make ultimate truth claims because, the belief is, if we believe we know the truth of the matter, then we will run rough-shod over those who do not believe as we do. We'll have to claim our own superiority and their inferiority. This concern is fair enough, of course, because it has history behind it in the form of Western colonization of other peoples in the name of the Truth. But it seems that we have swung the pendulum back in the other direction too far and in some quarters relinquished the claim that there is Ultimate Truth to even know in the first place or in other quarters the only claim to ultimate truth that we allow ourselves is one that is universally held by all religions. This makes, for instance, the Christian claim of the incarnation and the resurrection problematic, to say the least, because there really aren't other religions that place God fully incarnate in one human being who was executed, entombed, and bodily resurrected.

So what are we to do? I'm asking myself this in a new way lately and letting you in on my own grappling with what seems to me to be a temptation to hedge the truth or to hedge my own belief in the truth of the matter when I sense it being too particular and thus exclusive of other truths. I like the sentiment that the various religions are like many

paths up the same mountain, but I wonder if we don't gloss over the fact that many religions define the mountain in significantly different ways?

There really is no logical necessity that once someone claims to believe that a particular system of thought, say Christianity, expresses the ultimate truth of why we are here and where we are going, that he or she will necessarily approach others with superiority and bigotry. It's really possible to believe that "Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father but through him" and still be just and kind and loving to others? Do we really have to give up, I wonder, the particular truth claims of the Christian faith in order to be good and fair to others? Or could it be that the very holding-fast to the ultimate truth claims of Christianity could lead us to an even greater love and acceptance of our brothers and sisters of other faith traditions?

We celebrate Jesus' incarnation at Christmas and his resurrection at Easter, both miraculous moments that unveil, we say, God's intention for not just a few of us but for all humanity and in fact for the very created order itself. It really is a very particular and specific revelation of the Truth of things with a capital "T" and doesn't honestly lend itself to being one truth of the way things are among many alternate truths of the way things are. I mean, either God really manifested Godself in the particular human form of Jesus and the whole life, death, and resurrection is a revelation of the truth of the way things are... or not. Are we convinced or not? Have we put the time and effort, really, into being able to say we are convinced or not? I'm not so sure one can logically say this is what I believe is the truth, but your truth is valid too if you believe he was only a wise teacher? Could we not instead say no, I believe you're wrong about him just being a teacher, but that's ok that you are wrong about that! I understand that you think I am equally wrong. I'm not going to hurt you or subjugate you for that perspective and I'm hoping you won't turn on me either. I mean we really could decide not to fight one another on it too much and to live together as brothers nonetheless in love. This seems more honest to me than saying "I believe this is the truth, you believe the opposite is the truth, let's just say there are many truths."

Part of what's eliciting this line of thinking for me is our current conversation as a church around Anthony Robinson's book called "Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations". In the chapter that we discussed on Thursday and that another group is discussing right after church today, Robinson asks us to talk about why we are

here and challenges us to articulate a clear and compelling purpose. He refers to a quote on the door of an organization that went out of business and the quote said: “We’ve gone out of business because we didn’t know what business we were in.” Robinson maintains that the protestant mainline tradition, of which we are a part, is under threat of going out of business because it doesn’t know the business it’s in. And I want to suggest this morning that this very issue of claiming ultimate truth and the specifically liberal protestant temptation to hedge on it out of fear of offending “the other” may be one BIG reason why we have lost what business we are in.

At one point towards the end of the chapter, Robinson says that we really don’t have to go very far at all to figure out our purpose for it’s all right there in the Bible. And then he offers a number of simple phrases many of which come from the mouth of Jesus. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” That’s difficult to do, though, and do seriously if we are not convinced ourselves of the ultimate truth claim that Jesus reveals something unique about God. Or another one: “Be witness to the world of what God has done through the risen Lord.” God has done something specific in the world and to the world through the figure of Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul sees our purpose as being quite simply to bear witness to it and invite others into the truth of it. But is it something that the liberal Protestant church is convinced of or at least acts convinced of?

To end, I would propose a thought to be considered in the upcoming book group along these lines: One of our central beliefs as a church and wider denomination is that we shouldn’t define our beliefs too rigidly (it’s why we are “non-creedal”, we say) so that the individual and his or her relationship with God is kept sacrosanct, so that “all are welcome here”. But my challenge is: can there arise out of an undefined belief structure a compellingly defined purpose.? I would challenge that a half-baked sense of what we believe together as a community will necessarily result in a half-baked sense of what we should do about it.

Where is the truth that we are ultimately holding out for, the truth that we, like Stephen, might be willing to die for, because we know it so deeply in our bones to be true? What are we convicted by in our hearts? What do we believe is the truth of the matter about our lives and this world? For it’s only out of what we believe to be true ultimately that a renewed sense of purpose will come.