

THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH
Sunday After Ascension – May 28, 2006 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Let's take a little test this morning. Tell me, if the answer is true or false. "Eggs are bad for you." I hear some say true and more say false. Okay. Let's try another. "Global warming is not a problem." Well, only a couple of you say true and most say false. Here's another one. "Wine is bad for you." Wow! All say false! You've got to love Episcopalians!

I don't know about you, but these days it seems like every day some says that this is bad for you. Eggs cause high cholesterol. The environment is being destroyed. Wine is bad for you. Sometimes it makes me feel like all we can do is stop eating and drinking everything! But wait! In a couple weeks or months, out comes another report that counters the other one. What is the truth? It's hard to tell.

We live in a time when lies are made out to be the truth. Our government tells us things that we learn just aren't true. We're told that it's okay ... it's in our best interest. The administration and Congress are suffering from the worst poll numbers in years. Advertisers tell us we just can't live without that BMW or Lexus luxury car. Do we really need to spend that much money to transport ourselves around? The oil companies tell us that gas costs are going to rise and they can't do anything about it. What is the truth?

It seems we live with more and more lies all the time. It is so hard to find the truth; many of us just stop looking. We resign ourselves to thinking this is the way it is going to be. Even religion gets caught up in this. We can look down through history and see religious groups suppressing people or ideas for fear that they will undermine their structures. The truth suffers.

It was interesting to see the fervor that the release of the "Gospel of Judas" raised just before Easter. Has anyone here read it? What a story! It seems that Judas, the betrayer as we have come to know him, really plotted with Jesus to precipitate his arrest and trial. We hear in Scripture today that Judas died and the implication is that his betrayal resulted in death. Judas rejected Jesus and thus died! The new evidence we have been given is supposed to make us question what truth of Christianity. Judas wasn't really a bad man; he was Jesus' favorite disciple. What is a person to believe?

Do we understand that Judas was a zealot? That is the equivalent of what we might call a freedom fighter or a patriot. In reality, Judas was part of a group that wanted to violently overthrow the Roman government! If you were Roman, the zealots are what we would call terrorists or insurgents! Interesting, isn't it?

What are we going to do with the old image of Judas? The worst thing you could call another person is a "Judas" one who betrays those closest to him. John Killington, in a recent copy of Christian Century magazine, talks about going to see the rock musical "Jesus Christ Superstar" in London. He and his wife went back stage to meet some of the actors. The characters that played Jesus and Judas spoke with him. They shared that they alternated the roles of Jesus and Judas every night, one playing one character and the next night, the other. They said before, the person who only played Judas would be ostracized by the rest of the cast! Who will we reject if our old image of Judas is false?

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Have any of you seen the movie, “The Da Vinci Code?” The movie follows Dan Brown’s book pretty close. If you believe either the movie or the book, Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus and had a daughter! Wow! Jesus was a daddy and had kids! This challenges the longstanding belief that Mary was a prostitute. Never mind that she was one of the few that stood at the cross when Jesus was crucified. Never mind that she was the one who found the empty tomb first! This is hot stuff! Jesus was married to Mary!

Do you know what? It doesn’t matter to me who and what Judas was in relationship to Jesus. The discovery of his Gospel doesn’t shake or destroy my faith. It’s not important who Judas was ... he is only has a minor role in the story of Jesus. It doesn’t matter to me if Jesus was married or not. As a matter of fact, it would have been very strange in 1st century Palestine for a Jewish rabbi in his 30’s not to be married! What about Mary? So what if she was married to Jesus? Again, she is a participant in the Gospel, but not the central figure. It doesn’t matter to our faith.

We would do well to say about Judas and Mary, so what? What is the truth? It doesn’t matter what whether Judas was the betrayer we think or the friend of Jesus who precipitated the confrontation. It doesn’t matter if Mary was just the follower we know or the wife of Jesus. Neither of these things changes the truth about Jesus and the Gospel.

The truth for us is spelled out in John’s Gospel. Jesus is gathered the night before he died with his closest follower. He breaks bread and shares wine with them. He gives them a new commandment. The truth for us that unfolds in Christianity is threefold. First, we come to know God loves us. Next, we come to know that God sent Jesus to die for our sins. Finally, we know that if we believe in God and Jesus we will have eternal life. That is the truth for us. All else is secondary. The Spirit of truth that Jesus speaks about, the word of truth, is summed up in the commandment of love and the person of Jesus!

It’s interesting to think about Judas and Mary Magdalene. They are on the list of things I want to ask when I arrive at the pearly gates! I think it will be an eternity to answer all the questions I have on my list! I can add “Was Judas a betrayer?” and “Was Jesus married to Mary Magdalene?” to “Where was Jesus from age 12 to 30?” But these questions are minor compared to the truth of God’s love and the truth of Jesus Christ. Love, Jesus Christ and new life ... these are the important truths!

There’s another truth for us as Episcopalians mentioned in Acts. Peter recognized a need to fill the place vacated by Judas’ absence. He wanted to have 12 disciples, or apostles as we come to know them. Why is twelve important? It reflects the twelve tribes of Israel! Jacob in the Hebrew Scriptures had twelve sons, and they would come to represent the whole nation of Israel and the people of God. The symbolism is important because of a new truth. The twelve disciples represent the new Israel, the new people of God ... and a new truth!

Those twelve men would lay hands on others to empower them to be the Christian community. We can look at our own bishop, George Councill, and trace his consecration back to Peter himself! George stands in the apostolic succession that is nearly 2,000 years old! I participate in the apostolic succession by the virtue of having Bishop Peter Lee lay his hands on me at my ordination! I am connected to Jesus and those first disciples by this act! Are any of you here

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confirmed? Raise your hands; please ... you too are part of the apostolic succession. A bishop laid hands on you! We are connected with the faith community of the past and present by this succession. We will be connected with those Christians in the future as well! Now that is truth! This is one of the things that is important to us as Episcopalians!

There are a great many lies that will vie for our attention in life. There are a great many things that will be interesting but aren't going to make much of a difference to our faith. But remember the truths that do matter. Apostolic succession speaks to the truth of our connection with the community of faith in the past, right now and in the future! John's Gospel reminds us of the threefold truth that God loves us, Jesus died for us and through believing we have eternal life!

It's time that we became more concerned with telling and sharing the truth. As Christians, this is what it is all about for us. It's our chance now to become truth bearers. Good luck and God bless us in our efforts! Amen!