

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Honesty (part 2)"
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(Sixth Sunday after Easter)

We talked last week about how unclear the culture is on what it means to be honest. Apparently, many, many people admit either to cheating at university or not being clear on what cheating means. Similarly, many also admit to not telling the truth at home and at work, and do not know what "stealing" means in terms of office supplies. For Christians, the Scriptures tell us that one day all humanity, every individual will give an account to God for our deeds and our words and our thoughts. We are charged with accurately representing reality and telling the truth, not only in tax season but consistently throughout the year.

But if we are confused in terms of our general day to day ethics and morality, how much more are we confused in terms of what to say about our religious and spiritual commitments. Christians today seem deathly afraid of saying what traditionally Christians have said about their faith for centuries. In our culture, it may be okay to say some new radical thing that negates the Apostles' Creed, or to establish some multi-religious or syncretistic statement, but it seems politically incorrect to be a traditional or orthodox Christian. And this is happening in an age where every other religious path is generously encouraged to establish their spirituality and religion.

May I suggest that this odd state of affairs comes about as the majority religious position of our culture declines and as we continue to establish a post-Christian era in Canada. The disestablishment of the Christian faith in the schools in Newfoundland in 1997 was just a small sign of what is happening in the larger culture. And although it is impossible to predict where all this is going, it is possible to imagine a time where Christianity becomes so weak in Canada that we will need missionaries from Africa and Asia to remind us of the core of Gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we are already in that time.

That would take us full-circle back to the time when Paul was in Athens, trying to communicate the faith to a culture that had no knowledge, no accurate knowledge of orthodox Christianity. We need to learn from Paul, rather than criticize him, as one of the central teachers of the faith in the establishment of the early church.

Paul was a truth teller. He showed not only his education, but also his creativity and sensitivity in how he presented Christianity to the philosophers and those in the Areopagus. This was an Athenian Council that met in the Royal Porch (*stoa basileios*) in the Athenian marketplace (*agora*). This institution went back to ancient times and frequently had special jurisdiction in matters of morals and religion, which made it all the more interesting that Paul would be invited to speak to such a group.

(source: "Areopagus," by F.F. Bruce, in the New Bible Dictionary, second edition)

Paul noticed and connected with the Greek philosophers (even Epicureans, who believed in the achievement of happiness by limiting desire and promoting friendship and Stoics, who desired to align the will with the inherent Reason, or *Logos*, of the Universe.) In fact, one commentator said Paul was using a Stoic type of reasoning in his presentation of the faith.

(source: M.H. Cressey, "Epicureans," "Stoics," ibid.)

He respectfully acknowledged their being "extremely religious" (v. 22) while realizing that it would be a challenge to present a monotheistic (=one God) truth to a polytheistic (=many gods) audience. So he looked out over the many altars to various gods and found one addressed to an unknown god.

Here he found an openness to an unknown way. Whether there truly was an openness or not, we don't know, neither did he. But he pressed on. He began to talk about a God who didn't depend on human beings, but quite the contrary, humanity, every individual depends on this one God.

Because there was a notion throughout ancient times and in many cultures that the offerings from the people to the gods sustained the gods. Food offerings quenched their hunger and other offerings pacified their bad side. So it was a kind of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" relationship. If you do something nice for the god, the god might do something nice for you.

But this new God didn't need or depend on the offerings. This new one God is the source of Life itself, creating humanity, and setting up the boundaries of life. This new one God wasn't new at all, but was the original and placed a desire in every human being to search for relationship with this one God. Much later in history, in the 17th century, Blaise Pascal would call this

search for God placed within us “a God shaped vacuum” that only God can fill.

Thus Paul connects with a philosophical argument, and with local poetry. He quotes local poets and appreciates that human beings are the offspring of God. Here he warns people to remember the personhood of God. Relationship to this living one God is key, not some inanimate, statue-like representation of deity. God is alive, and more in charge than you think. In fact, God has established a time when every human being will be judged by a person who is perfectly just and perfectly loving. That person came to the earth, was tortured to death by his own people, and was raised back to life by this one living God. The historical resurrection of the dead with witnesses continues to be one of Paul's main arguments. A few listened and became believers. Some of their names are recorded. Most sneered.

And whenever we risk sharing our faith journey with God. Some will listen respectfully, others will not. Some will believe alongside us, others will not. But may God grant us the courage to share our story, our faith, our trust in this same living God, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Some in our families will sneer at us, some neighbors may do the same. But no matter what the consequence, I urge you to be honest with those you care about. Honesty means telling people what you believe, not being ashamed of believing what is written in the Apostles' Creed, not being ashamed of believing what others may consider just a bunch of stories.

The power of what you have received in your Christian faith is a precious thing. All of us have much more to learn about this faith, not to dismantle it, but to increase in trust in this relationship to this wonderful God. Have I worked out why God has allowed what God has allowed over the centuries? No. I haven't even worked out what my parents, brothers, wife and children have done and why. I do not claim to have all the answers, but I stand here to encourage you to tell your Christian story, how God has made Himself practical and real to you.

And if you are still wanting to know more about this God, come along on the journey here, to new and wonderful courses and events. We will be offering many courses, events, and regular worship to help you understand that God is still working here in Newfoundland. It is okay to admit how little you know. It is okay to continue growing in that which may have very recently

been revealed to you, or something that you have known or at least partially understood since you were a child.

But determine to know and give your life to the Giver of Life, Jesus Christ. From that position, every other outreach takes place, every other work of justice and compassion takes place. No matter what culture or religion or non-religion the person you are talking to happens to hold, nevertheless, you can confidently, but not arrogantly speak forth what you believe. We have received the bread of life and must share it, as Living Faith says, with others who are hungry, just as we are.

But we need clarity and courage to tell the message; clarity to talk about the love of God, how much God loves us, and how we know that; clarity to talk about the fact that we do sin, that we corporately confess our sins weekly because we need God to transform us anew, every day; clarity to turn from our sins, and learn more of Jesus Christ; clarity to honour Him with our actions, our words, our lives. So if these things aren't clear to you, talk to me, or the church leaders here, to make your beliefs clearer. And then ask God for the courage to communicate what you believe in an environment that may or may not be attentive or even friendly to what we say. Together we have a mission to tell our message to those who are around us. This is one way God uses us to reach others who need God desperately.

Let us pray.