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STILL SPEAKING

John 16:12-15

Well, it has begun.

Synod, that is. The annual gathering of delegates from across the Christian Reformed Church in North America. They've been gathered in Grand Rapids since Friday, and will be deliberating through most of this week.

Our own Sally Larsen is there, as a representative of Hope Church and Classis Chicago South.

And tomorrow evening, Lord willing, Dr. Yudha Thianto will be approved as a new member of the faculty at Calvin Theological Seminary.

This year's Synod feels particularly weighty. With the last two years cancelled due to Covid, this year's gathering has an oversized agenda, dominated—of course—by the Human Sexuality Report.

There is much division and diversity of opinion over that report, and the recommendations that it makes to the denomination.

Some laud the report and affirm its conservative position on human sexuality. They long to stay faithful to Scripture and tradition, and to the historical position of the Christian Reformed Church.

Some would rather see the Christian Reformed Church take a more affirming stance toward our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters. They long to show Christian love and hospitality to friend and family and stranger.

Some worry what might happen to CRC pastors, elders, teachers, and institutions if the denomination formally takes a stand on one side—and requires its leaders and employees to agree.

Some worry that a church split is looming.

Some of *you* have participated in listening groups here at Hope. Opportunities to hear one another's hearts and thoughts and stories. Long overdue opportunities, perhaps, to talk about topics that are deeply human and deeply important.

Those of us who are, generally, conflict averse (*raises hand) would perhaps prefer to just keep talking and listening. Appoint another study committee. Host more conversation circles. Keep dancing with the other until some kind of consensus emerges.

But, as Laura de Jong wrote in a piece last week¹, it's likely that "there are going to be some very loud voices [at Synod], who will be very clear that there's only one way forward, and it's theirs."

¹ <https://blog.reformedjournal.com/2022/06/02/pond-contours/>

Plus, she points out, “eventually we’re going to have to figure out where we stand on these things. Churches will have to decide what their level of welcome and inclusion for the LGBT community will look like. We can’t just keep talking.”

Decisions will be made. To those decision makers, Hope has sent our overture about protecting spaces and congregations, like ours, where multiple viewpoints can coexist – in (as Roz put it) a pond of grace. Because that’s who we are.

And now we wait. And pray.

And in that waiting and praying, I am drawn to these words in our text this morning: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.”

Surely the church needs that Spirit now. Surely the church needs guidance now.

And—insofar as the challenges besetting Synod this week are symptomatic of a wider cultural malaise—surely we *all* need a fresh outpouring of the Spirit of truth.

How else will we find our way through the murkiness of these times?

How else will we find our way to clarity? to unity?

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.”

Truth.

It’s a word that occurs over and over in John’s gospel.

From the prologue, where John introduces Jesus as the word made flesh, dwelling among us, coming from the Father, full of grace and *truth*—truth is a thematic motif that surfaces again and again, building from Jesus’ glorious incarnation to the moment when he stands, stripped and beaten, before Pontius Pilate. And Pilate asks the question that has resounded through the centuries: “What is truth?”

Pilate—the patron saint of philosophers, cynics, and skeptics.

What is truth?

How would *you* answer Pilate’s question?

What kind of knowledge does *truth* traffic in?

Facts? Experience? Revelation?

How do you know what you know? Why do you trust it to be true?

Who do you trust to guide you into truth?

Blaise Pascal (*Catholic theologian after the Reformation*) once said that “Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established that, unless we love the truth, we cannot know it.”

Those words are almost 400 years old. Almost feels prophetic to our times.

Although I suppose it's possible that we are not as unique as we feel, and all times are beset with the obscurity of truth...

"Unless we love the truth, we cannot know it."

In the Gospel of John, truth is multifaceted.

It's not just propositional. It's not rationalistic.

It's something like the core reality of the universe, the best and most true of all that is true.

It's truth that can't be contained in a document, in words.

In fact, John introduces us to truth as a *person*. The Word, made flesh. Truth is Jesus, who himself says, "I am the way, the *truth*, and the life."

The embodiment of eternal truth found in God himself—the core reality of the universe—is made known in the person of Jesus.

The same Jesus who stands before Pilate.

"Unless we love the truth, we cannot know it."

Whatever we claim as truth, it ought to look like Jesus. Conviction, and compassion, and costly, self-giving love.

Our text is part of the Upper Room Discourse. The part of John's gospel, before the cross, before the betrayal and arrest, where time slows down and we listen in on Jesus's words to his disciples.

They are overwhelmingly words of comfort and assurance, as he prepares his closest friends for what's to come.

And Jesus has much to say about the Holy Spirit. The Comforter. The Advocate. And, here, the Spirit of truth.²

Jesus is leaving, but truth is not. Truth remains personified with us in the Holy Spirit, who guides us back to Jesus, back to the Word of truth, lived as a human life.

Because in John's gospel, truth is just that: *lived*. Enfleshed not just in Jesus but also in who we are, and what we do. In lives that become holy. In John 17, Jesus will pray for his disciples. "*Sanctify* them in your truth. Your word is truth."

Truth is not just propositional, not just intellectual. It can't be compartmentalized. If we *know* the truth, we know a wind of freedom that ought to blow through our everyday lives and change who we are.

² Also 14:17 and 5:26

There is a phrase that Moe and I keep coming back to in our marriage. In moments of challenge, and especially in difficult decisions, we have found ourselves pausing to say:

“If we believe what we say we believe, then _____”

For us, that exercise has led to hard-but-good things like sharing our home with Moe’s parents. And staying in our neighborhood, despite disinvestment and spikes in violence.

There’s no voice from on high. There’s no writing on the wall.

Sometimes there are just quiet tears when I recognize the congruence between my cognitive faith and the next step that lies in front of me. Tears because I suddenly have more clarity on what comes next, and it’s not the easy road. But tears too because I’m grateful for what feels like guidance, and I feel a sense of peace that stepping forward will lead to something good.

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.”

There’s something beautiful about the first verse in our text. About the thought of Jesus wanting to say more, but recognizing the limited capacity of his friends—overwhelmed by grief, anxiety, confusion. More would be more than they could bear. More than they could comprehend.

So Jesus promises the Spirit. The Spirit of truth, through whom Jesus—crucified, risen, ascended, glorified—is still speaking to the Church.

“He will not speak on his own. He will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.”

Through the Spirit, Jesus is still speaking to the church.

Calling disciples together, from all walks of life.

Teaching them to obey his commands.

Leading them to love.

Leading them to the cross.

Through the Spirit, Jesus says to the church: “I am with you always.”

Through the Spirit, Jesus is still guiding us to truth, to himself, to the Father.

Today is Trinity Sunday—the week when we pause, after rehearsing the salvation story from Advent to Pentecost, to recognize the God revealed in that story. One God, in three persons. Father, Son, and Spirit.

And all three members of the Trinity are here in this passage. The Father gives everything to the Son. And the Son gives everything to the Spirit. And the Spirit glorifies the Son.

Here we catch a glimpse of the Trinitarian community of mutual love. We see how, in the words of Todd Hunter, “each member of the Trinity... lovingly admires, blesses, supports, empowers, inspires and builds up the others.”

This, according to our faith, is the core reality of the universe. This is truth. Mystery, to be sure. But truth. A God whose character it is to love and give and honor. A God who is at once both one and three, unity and diversity.

A God who is wholly able to take the church at an impasse and do a new thing.

One more thing:

When John says that Jesus came from the Father, full of grace and truth, he is likely hearkening back to an Old Testament formula, where God is revealed as YHWH, God of steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*emet*)--it's the same word translated elsewhere as truth.

God is the God of *hesed* and *emet*, of grace and truth.

But it's worth noting that, in the Old Testament narrative, that *truth*—that steady faithfulness of God, that character at the core of all things—is set against the backdrop of Israel's mess.

Israel is often stiff-necked and wayward. Israel wrestles with God. But God is full of grace and truth.

The story of the Church through the ages is not all that different. It's a story of stubbornness and splits, messes and misunderstandings. The Church is deeply human, deeply flawed. But God is full of grace and truth.

And—as we've seen in Acts—God can take even visions and chance encounters, earthquakes and shipwrecks, councils and conflicts, and use them to move the church in the right direction.

As the old song says, “The Holy Spirit will move the church.”

Mess and all.

There are no simple answers for our denomination. And there are likely no simple answers for wherever you find yourself longing for guidance and truth.

But we have the assurance that we are not left to our own devices. Come what may, Truth is still a person, alive among us, through the Spirit. Still speaking, through the Word and through each other. Still guiding. Still surprising.

May we, in humility, listen well.