

July 9, 2017

Sermon: "Our Ministry of Truth"

Jim Gregory

Prelude: What is your ministry? That was the theme suggested for the members of our congregation who were asked to lead Sunday Worship Services this Summer. Jim Gregory, a "lapsed philosopher," replied: I naturally chose Truth as mine. Having been raised Catholic, my first great answers were delivered as the Gospel truth, incontestable since these are the Words of the Lord. Father Stack said Yes, you may debate and question, but your course will lead back to the one true religion. I found doubts as well, and a few hidden roots. We baby boomers grew up as children of the Sixties, when the maxim of My Generation was 'Trust no one over age 30'. Yet I went on to Cornell with a bright promise of delving into necessary truths and inspiring theories. I found plenty of those, but also noted that the professional philosopher was more likely to make his mark by disproof, finding the fatal flaw, the telling counter-example, and maybe reducing a whole system of belief to absurdity. As a career path I chose dance. Attending a leaders conference I once introduced myself as a Lapsed Philosopher. So when my wife led me to try out this church, I was soon struck by a phrase in our Affirmation -- "To seek the truth in love". What would that be like?

Turns out it is far from a competition for truth. Universalism asks us to help one another, to rely on each other. This means respecting one another's truth, learning from each other as we go, but not abandoning others in order to grasp Truth for oneself. We will encounter challenging truths ahead; so let us proceed together today in a spirit of worship.

SERMON:

Authors of fiction want to make it real. They want their characters to be vibrant, memorable, identifiable. So they conceive a backstory, and endow their cast with certain abilities, a temperament, a flaw. Later, making the rounds of the talk show circuit, the novelist or screenwriter so often reports that "the characters started writing the story themselves". Well, truth is stranger than fiction; truth is stronger than fiction. And the path of Truth will lead you where it goes. I started out to write a truthful little reflection, that might have some relevance in our challenging climate of fake news and

alternate facts. I avoided entitling it 'The Ministry of Truth', with those overtones of a Brave New World. I foresaw a shining, hopeful goal. But my characters lead me the long way around. Whether a guide dog on a leash, a tiger by the tail, a Muse taking my hand, or a Jack Nicholson portrayal, they took me where the Jefferson Airplane went. "When the truth is found to be lies" ... That is a disturbing place. So what help is there? "Don't you need somebody to love?" Yes, take a hand, fall back on love. Just add that it might be many hands, the love of a community, and you have my sermon, in musical shorthand.

I could almost drop my mic and walk away now. But this is a guy who doesn't post much on Facebook. I found several points of interest while exploring this labyrinth of truth. I'd love to go further, with an intrepid band of truth seekers. Are you comfortable with that? There will be dark places, where you won't want to shine too bright a light. Look, many of us balk at higher mathematics, physics, life insurance. We can barely handle death and taxes, so beware when we plumb deeper truths about eternity and creation, morality and an after life. A single-minded a pursuit of truth pushes some away, as a bookworm or a cloistered monk. Others it pushes over the edge: an evil genius, a mad scientist, members of certain cults. This theme crisscrosses from real life into fiction and back again. Dr. Frankenstein's crazed pursuit of the secret of life leads him to reanimation, with monstrous consequences. Albert Einstein cracked many secrets of the universe, while alienating his family. Did you watch Raiders of the Lost Ark? You know you mustn't look directly at the divine gift you open. The Nazi treasure hunters, though, get their faces melted off. 2001 : A Space Odyssey portrays the computer HAL taking over the ship, locking out the human pilot. This is unsettlingly close to a recent 60 Minutes feature. Experts wonder, when computers surpass us will they be kind? On a movie planet, the Council of Apes hides the secrets of nuclear war that laid waste the human world. Spoiler alert: when Charlton Heston confronts this truth it brings him to his knees. Let's be glad it hasn't come to that. The terror of our day is that, on line, you can find both bombing reports and bomb recipes.

Do you still want the truth? OK, we can test that resolve with a call and response. For you seekers of truth, your line is "We want the Truth". What's your line? We***

You want what? We***

Adam and Eve had a Tree of Knowledge. You want what? We***
Adam and Eve ate that Forbidden Fruit. You want what? We***
They were thrown out of Eden. And you want what? We***
They brought original sin down on all humanity. And you want
what? We***
The truth made them ashamed of their own skin. And you want what? We***
God forbade humans from the ultimate truth. And you want that? We***

You can't handle the truth.

That quote may stand; there *are* hard truths, inconvenient truths, and shocking realizations. We mortals often shield one another from the truth. There is the white lie, the keeping of children from adult and family worries. One says "Too much information"; "I can't unsee that." News anchors warn us that "the following story contains images which may be too intense for some viewers"; and the station did not even consider showing their most graphic images of the carnage. First responders and emergency room professionals get toughened by what they've seen. But there still comes a disaster that drives even these heroes to seek counselling, for themselves. Who can bear the full weight of the suffering, the fear and pain, the loss, the bloodshed in even one bombing or shooting? Let alone all that goes down in a day. There are deniers, and some of them *are* simply pernicious. But I suspect some deniers are just unable to cope with the horror, and have to make up a cover story. Denial is a stage of grief.

Do you want full knowledge of such a horror, as if you had witnessed it, or actually suffered through it? That is crushing knowledge, incapacitating knowledge, just too close up to the truth. And human history is weighted with such. But it goes beyond physical pain and loss. There is the realization that we humans brought it on ourselves, did it to our fellows. So there is that element of cruelty. Rev. Adam has said there is good and evil in all of us. Can you embrace the fact that it is not evenly distributed? And that some people are evil enough to inflame others, hot air fanning the twin coals of fear and hate. That brings dangers to a boiling point, as it already has done -- in Europe under the fascists' shadow for instance.

OK, this is getting dark *and* topical. Before we go off spiraling we must land on some kind of bedrock, and then bend our steps toward a gentler light. The healthy human mind recoils from some things. "I can't wrap my mind around that." "TMI". Or in 60's speak, "that blows my mind". There's a universal roadblock to imagining one's own death. The young feel

immortal. Even the psychic does not foresee the hour of her demise. And in nightmares we wake up before hitting the bottom. We are endowed with a drive to survive, to rebound.

For extra clarity philosophers point out what they are *not* claiming, what they *haven't* proven. So here is my disclaimer. There *are* problems you must notice; there *are* times you must face facts and act. To quote Netflix, "if you always wear rose-colored glasses you will miss the red flags". How to tell when you have seen enough is a serious topic worth an essay of its own. You might ask me over coffee how I compare it to appreciating art, as in a museum; but my Muse is pulling me away. I had also written a good strong passage extolling the value of philosophical method. Time constraints made me repeal and replace those paragraphs. All that's left is this footnote. You'll have noticed I'm not quoting the great philosophers here; nor our beloved poets. I was trained in a school of philosophy where meaning is found in the forms and uses of ordinary language, even the memes of pop culture. But the heart of what I dare to say here was forged in the chalice of this church.

I believe in the Clarity of Grief. Have you experienced it? When a close relative or friend passes away, your loss and grief may crystallize your thoughts about them, and about life itself. You realize just how much they meant to you, and how fragile life may be. This is the clarity of grief. But even when you hear your own news, your genetics results, your diagnosis, you may gain such clarity. 'So I did not get accepted'; 'will I walk again?'; 'how many months do I have?' That sure can focus you on the rest of your life -- or crush you. There must be **two** sides to that coin of Grief. When you can't handle the truth the reverse side is shown. When you find truth blazing painfully -- that I shall dub the Grief of Clarity.

Have we not tears, all of us? Will our tears cool that blaze? "Cry me a river" they say. Perhaps, if we do not let grief blind us, our tears may actually buoy us up. Let's explore that metaphorical river, using a different call and response. I'll start it by calling out "Why Do You Cry?" And all may respond "Have we not tears?".

"WHY*** "HAVE*** Yes you have tears, cleansing tears. Tears that bring grief to the surface; tears that release some of your pain; tears that call others to your side. Cry it out, and find a way to carry on.

'WHY*** 'HAVE*** Yes you have tears, sacred tears. Tears that

express the ultimate feeling; tears that can rain down love on a terminal patient, or a casket. In the fairy tales, true tears sometimes reanimate the loved one. In real life, they will emblazon the love you feel in the hearts of many, and upon the memory of the one you grieve.

'WHY*** 'HAVE*** Yes you have tears, tears of joy. From the birth of a baby, to getting into the school of your choice, to a wedding ceremony, to a safe return. You have tears of joy. Do not be blind to your tears of joy.

You have a lot going for you. No wonder you are intrepid. You don't need to fixate on every bleak truth. You don't have to face your difficulties alone. Conversely, no one else has to fight all your battles for you. Not your doctor, your senator, your minister. You have the positives to help yourself -- and another. It's unrealistic to think anyone can eliminate all the negatives. So let us resolve to accentuate the positives. Even beyond that roadblock of death, we can leap across to envision our own memorial service. Many even plan their own. What a celebration, with dear and distant friends. What songs would they sing; what would they have to say? We can picture ourselves attending that kind of party, a real love fest.

In closing, we reaffirm Our Ministry, seeking the truth in love. Our own ministers have expressed that in a number of ways. Len Deroche ended his last sermon for us with these words. "Remember, it matters not so much what you disagree about as *how* you disagree." So while trying to get the answers, be kind to each other. That's seeking truth in love. I already referred to Adam Robersmith. Do you want a line from Jan Nielsen? Well, she'd often say from this podium "Don't let the perfect get in the way of the good". I'm hearing 'don't let perfect accuracy get in the way of the love'. Would you like to hear a quote from Rev. Stephen Kendrick? OK, then come back next week.