

AN EMBODIED TRUTH

Easter 6: Orphaned and adopted

Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

In less than five months,
2011 has turned out to be a stunningly catastrophic year.

Now, I assure you this sermon *will* be, as all sermons *should* be,
a proclamation of the Gospel, a telling of the Good News.

But let me get the bad news out on the table, first thing.
An incomprehensible 15,000 people killed in Japan,
from earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster.
Thousands killed in the Libyan civil war,
and uprisings throughout the Middle East.
Over 800 dead in Nigeria due to inter-religious violence,
as we heard from our brother two weeks ago.
Thousands killed in terrorist attacks around the world.
Several hundred died in commercial airline crashes.
Hundreds dead in flooding in Australia,
earthquakes in New Zealand and Burma.
And now, in *our* country, disastrous flooding and tornadoes.

In an average full year, there are 28 deadly tornadoes in the U.S.
and 40 people die from them.
So far in 2011, we've had more 50 deadly tornadoes,
and 520 people died.

Tens of thousands in our country alone,
have lost their homes and possessions in one disaster or another.

It boggles our minds.
It shakes our faith.

People of strong Christian faith—
people who believe that there is a God
whose nature is love,
and who is active in our world—
are having their faith sorely tried.

They are wrestling mightily with God.
Some of those wrestlers are among us this morning,
because of personal tragedy and suffering and grief
in these last five months, and at this very moment.

In a world like this, in a year like 2011,
it really is not surprising that some Christians cope
by focusing on a coming rapture.
It's no surprise that Christians literally all over the world,
especially Christians in desperately poor situations,
or in oppressive environments, under hostile regimes,
became fixed on the hope that on May 21 Christ would come,
and rapture the righteous
and judge the evil.
I am sad *for* them, in *their* sadness.

This is not new.
That many Christians consider it good news
to proclaim the end of the world.
That some Christians try to instill either hope . . . or fear . . .
by announcing that Christ is coming soon
to take the faithful away from this terrible place,
and to a completely different and beautiful place.

We *do* live in a world that strikes fear in many Christians.
Not only is there disaster on every hand—
wars, terrorism, famine, earthquakes, and deadly storms.
There is *also*, seemingly, a shrinking church.
The faithful are declining in both numbers and influence.
Christianity seems to be in serious jeopardy,
sometimes even under attack.
Christendom is either dead or dying.

So it's not surprising that out of a religious anxiety,
some focus on a theology of escape.
That is, escape for Christians,
and fiery judgement on everyone else.

I heard lots of judgement day jokes in the last couple weeks,
and laughed along with some of them.

But it is unbecoming of us to ridicule or laugh to scorn
our brothers and sisters who sincerely, but mistakenly,
thought they knew what God was up to on May 21.

We, *too*, are sometimes sincerely mistaken.

And in any case,

it is also *our* faith that Christ has promised to return.

It is *our* faith that God—whose nature is both love and justice—
has a mission on this earth to save and redeem
and restore and reconcile humanity and creation,
and one day to vanquish evil with a just judgement.

But there is no question that mission has not yet been accomplished.

It is a mission in progress,

and all who are willing,

are invited, *now*, to participate in that mission.

We are *not* told to wait around until it gets so bad
that we are whisked away from it.

We are told to collaborate with God *now*,
in God's ongoing work of salvation.

It is happening right *now*,

and it will *yet* happen in a *greater* way,
a more complete way.

Yes, there is an end, a purpose toward which God is moving.

And that purpose is love. And salvation.

This is the Good News.

That out of a pure and powerful love, God has saved.

And God is saving. And God will save.

When we speak of the Good News in *that* way,

it makes a huge difference both in the message of the Gospel,
and in the way we proclaim the message.

Our witness is more than an effort to win a rational argument,
or to prove others wrong.

Christian witness *needs* to express a Christ-like hospitality
and respect for the other.

It's tragic . . . *tragic* . . . that Christians are known these days,
by all the things they are against,
instead of by the Good News they proclaim,
and the love they express in life.

We could all take some clues from the scripture readings today,
from the Gospel of John, and the book of Acts.

In John 14, Jesus gave his followers the Good News
that he would never abandon them.

He had already warned them about his coming suffering and death.

But now he speaks words of comfort.

In essence, he says, I have given you the truth,

about God, about this world, about yourselves.

I have given you my words, my commandments.

Now, I give you myself.

Yes, I will soon be leaving.

But I will not be leaving you alone.

“The Father will send you an Advocate in my place.” v. 16

“This Advocate is the spirit of truth.” v. 17

“I will *not* leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

In a little while the world will no longer see me,

but *you* will see me; because I live, you *also* will live.

On that day you will know that I am in my Father,

and you in me, and I in you.”

“You in me and I in you.”

In Jesus, truth and loving relationship are inextricably tied together.

Jesus *never* dispensed truth as a cold, rational commodity.

He was drawn toward the people,

and drew them toward *him*, as he spoke truth.

He went against the grain

by embracing children,

touching lepers,

allowing women to touch him,

entering the home of known sinners,

all the while speaking the truth in love,

calling sinners to repent,
calling the righteous to be humble,
calling all people to live like the children of God that they are.

I wonder why today,
some Christians stand on their soapbox and rail against evil,
either on a street corner,
or more typically, in letters to editors, or talk radio,
and argue loudly with persons they have no relationship with,
and condemn those who disagree with them . . .
and think that they are following in the way of Jesus.

Maybe they think they are modeling their style of witness
after the bombastic apostle Paul,
who got himself in trouble everywhere he went,
and never seemed to have a shortage of enemies.

If so, I suspect they're forgetting about the way Paul conducted himself
in today's reading from Acts 17,
when he found himself in the pagan, metropolitan city of Athens.

Paul reserves his sharpest criticism for his *own* beloved
brothers and sisters in the church.
He doesn't mince words in calling his *own* people
to a deeper level of faithfulness.
That's why he has that rougher reputation.

But how does he act when called upon to be a witness
in a culture where *his* own culture and religion
were both completely foreign?

How does Paul give witness in the public square
when his tradition is a marginalized minority?
Which, when you stop and think about it,
is pretty much where *we* sit as Christians
in our post-Christendom society.

How does Paul witness in Athens,
when he encounters a host of pagan shrines and idols?
By writing scathing letters to the Athens News-Record?
By screaming at "you wrong-headed and depraved idolators,

who are destined for hell?"

Well, let's take a look at Acts 17,
starting earlier in the chapter, *before* today's reading.
Paul was dropped off in Athens,
after being whisked away from threat of death in Thessalonica.
While he was waiting for his friends to join him,
we see in v. 16 that he was walking around the city.
It says he was "distressed" by all the pagan shrines and idols.
As someone steeped in a culture that worshiped
only one all-powerful Creator God,
Paul's distress is understandable.
And, in fact, he engaged the Athenians in conversation,
and in the kind of debate that was common and encouraged
in a Greek marketplace.
His debate *intrigued* the local philosophers,
so Paul scored an invitation to the Areopagus—
a high honor for a Jewish preacher, no doubt.
They wanted to hear more.

So our reading today was Paul's speech in the Areopagus.
This sometimes fiery, argumentative, opinionated man
opens his mouth to speak to these Greek idol-worshippers,
and what comes out are soft words of respect.
In v. 22, he gives the people of Athens a heartfelt compliment:
"I see how extremely religious you are in every way."
King James says "superstitious," which makes it sound derogatory.
But Paul was not criticizing, he was *affirming*.
He said, "You Athenians take your religion seriously.
That's to be commended."

So, when the credibility of Paul's Judeo-Christian faith is on the line,
he opts for respect and humility.
He notices their yearning for the divine.
And he *affirms* them.

He says in v. 23, "I went through the city
and looked carefully at the objects of your worship."
Paul was there not to attack them, but to understand them.

He notes in particular, their shrine to an “unknown God,”
so he tells them, “I can introduce you to this unknown God.”

Amazing. And then Paul did something even *more* amazing.

In order to introduce them to Jesus,
he didn’t pull out the Torah or quote Old Testament prophets.

He used *their* own literature.

This mini-sermon, verses 24-28,
is chock full of analogies, and images, and ideas,
that resonated with Greek philosophers and intellectuals.

In v. 28, he quoted their philosophers and poets directly.

“In him we live and move and have our being,”
apparently a quote from Epimenides,
a poet philosopher from Crete.

And, “For we too are his offspring,”
a quote from the Greek poet Aratus, a Stoic.

Paul knew and respected his audience.

He engaged them where they were, on *their* terms,
and then with respect, he said,

“You know, there’s something more.”

And then he proclaimed the truth
embodied in the person of the risen Jesus.

To be sure, his message about resurrection
met with mixed reviews.

Some laughed and derided him.

Some were curious, and asked to hear more.

Some became believers.

But the point is,

only after respectfully listening with an openness to learn,
and a desire to more deeply understand,

did Paul challenge them to think in new ways.

It might not be a bad practice for us, as well.

That *before* we start preaching the Gospel in *any* culture,
we know that culture well enough

that we can quote the poetry of that culture.

The heart of Paul’s message, after he quoted their poets, was,

“The God you are looking for is among you already,
and is calling you and me, and all people everywhere,
to turn our lives around, to confess our sins,
and act like the children of God that we are.

“You have wonderful shrines,
but God is a lot closer than you think.

God doesn’t live in carved stone.

God is as close as a parent.

We are God’s offspring.”

It’s a message of truth, contained in relationship.

Greek philosophers were great at constructing lofty ideas,
and they were *good* ideas.

They influenced Paul.

Greek thought *shows up* in Paul’s preaching.

But the *missing* piece was relational.

God is close to us.

Ideas *must* become embodied in relationship.

“*In him . . . in God . . . we live and move and have our being.*”

The heart of the Gospel that the Athenians needed to hear,
came through with perfect clarity,

and not a hint of manipulation,

of condemnation,

of one-upmanship.

Disembodied truth, isn’t the whole truth.

Truth shouted by strangers from the street corner,

or the newspaper, or radio,

is, at *best*, an incomplete truth.

The true Gospel of Jesus Christ

is embodied in real relationship.

It draws our lives *toward* and *into* God.

It draws our lives *toward* and *into* the lives of others.

A Gospel that is true, like the Gospel Paul proclaimed in Athens,
is a Gospel that will draw us into the world of the other.

Truth has no integrity,

if it is spoken without a willingness to enter the world of the other.

Are you looking for a litmus test for truth? Try *this*.
Does it draw us into the world of the other,
and does it draw all of us together toward God in Christ?

Is our expression of truth *worthy* of the truth Jesus proclaimed?
Does it draw us and others into the orbit of God's affection?
Does it *sound* like the truth of Jesus who said,
"I will never leave you orphaned" . . .
"I am in you, and you in me"?

Does it resemble the intimacy, the relational closeness,
that we sense in the testimony you are about to hear
from one of our members, Jon Dutcher.
Jon lost his mother 9 days ago,
a mother he was intimately close to.
Though separated by many miles,
Jon, who struggles with Parkinsons Disease,
found solace in daily phone conversations with his mother.
Phone conversations that may or may *not* have included news.
But *often* included prayer, scripture, or song.

It's fitting, since those conversations were often over a phone line,
that we hear Jon's testimony in his words, but not in person.
They are leaving today for a trip to Australia to visit their daughter,
and could not be present in person.
So Jon recorded this on Friday...

"Sometimes I feel like a motherless child...a long way from home..."
My father passed away on 10th October, 2006; my mother just
4½ years later—20th May, 2011. Both of my parents were buried
next to my oldest brother who died 16th January, 1989. That leaves
me-- the oldest living member of the Frank Dutcher family.
Is it any wonder I feel like an orphan?! Doesn't it make sense?
But I am reassured by God's Word that the Spirit of Truth provides
a presence, literally a friendship for me in this godless world. How
can I sorrow on- and- on as though in an orphaned state when I
have this awesome friend who sticks with me through
thick-and-thin, closer than a brother or a mother or a father?!
Instead I sing with Mary, the mother of our Lord — "My soul

glorifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior...For
the mighty one (my friend and guide) has done great things for me!
Holy, holy, holy is his name. For He lifts up the humble, and sends
the rich away empty."

—Phil Kniss, May 29, 2011