

Truth Changes
Trinity Sunday
May 22, 2016
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Text: John 16

This past week was the memorial service for Bob Bos, a member of Hope Church who blessed this church community and Holland community in many ways for his 83 years, one of those ways being music - and there was glorious music in that service with hymns and choir and organ praising God. And another way Bob blessed us was with puns – and some of those puns were shared from things Bob himself had written; and Pastor Jill made up her own pun when she preached for that service –and I was so proud of her! Puns are not so much Jill’s thing, so it was impressive for her to do that. Some of you may know that puns are a bit more my kind of thing – my colleagues in the office know that much too well. And in fact the June HCNews will have the debut of the Living Hope Renovations Pun of the Month! – so be sure to check that out! (I’m not sure if the first one will be very good, but hopefully it will at least be something to build on ☺).

Now other than an excuse for me to slip in a pun – and an opportunity to give thanks to God for a saint of Hope Church - the reason I’m starting out this way is to say that part of why I like puns is that I like words: what they mean and how they mean. Words are interesting to me – not just as an intellectual exercise, but to play with and explore – that’s part of what draws me to poetry and liturgy (not just puns) ; words can open things up in us in unexpected and creative ways. And that’s what I had in mind today with the words of the sermon title: *TRUTH CHANGES* – I want to play with those words today. How does that strike you – *TRUTH CHANGES* - ? what does that sound like it means? Well, I have in mind a few different ways of hearing those words – and I’d like to take us through those. As I do so it’s actually going to take me a little while to get to the Scripture passages for today – but we will get there; and as we play around with these words – *TRUTH CHANGES* - see what it stirs up in you – some of your assumptions and reactions and convictions about what you believe.

TRUTH CHANGES - one way to hear those 2 words is that truth is relative – that there is no absolute truth to claim or rely on. So, if you are a person of faith, and you have the belief that such faith is about the unchanging truth of scripture or the unchanging truth of God – then seeing a sermon title like *TRUTH CHANGES* can make you a bit nervous, right? After all, having a faith in an unchanging truth seems important: God is the source of

truth and God does not change. It seems especially important in a culture that sees truth as relative – that some would say simply accommodates truth to what is current or convenient, with nothing solid to stand on or to stand for.

And I think that is often how the issue is posed: that religion is the bastion of an unchanging truth which is at war with a culture of relativism. Faith defends itself, or defends God, from those assailing the Truth. And when it plays out that way, then truth, faith, is really kind of a list, right? I think when you paint the scene as Unchanging Truth vs. Truth Changes, then the job of faith becomes making a list of all the true things – all the doctrines and beliefs: perhaps something like the Trinity, the doctrine of God in Three Persons, that we celebrate in our worship today - part of the list of what is true. And then what we do is assert and defend our list against the Truth Changers. The thing is, though, it never ends up just as Christianity vs “the culture” – truth is, different Christians have a bunch of different lists about what is true - and we’re always going at one another about our truth lists. Sometimes that is a healthy discussion, honing our convictions – but other times it is just competing claims to who really has the Unchanging Truth and accusations about who has lost the truth. Now it does not seem to me that the banner headline for a church should be: “We’re Not Sure About Truth!” But...if we are going to claim ‘The Truth’, then what’s our list? – do you have a list? You may think it’s simple, but it’s hard to make an ‘Unchanging Truth List’ that everyone agrees on.

TRUTH CHANGES – so here’s another way to hear those 2 words. You could hear it simply as something more like “Knowledge Changes” – that what we know about certain things changes. An example can be saying that the world is flat and that the sun revolves around the earth – at a certain point in time, these were asserted as true: just look around – you can see the world is flat (especially in Holland!) and can see the sun going around – of course it’s true; except when we discover it isn’t. Now this would seem less controversial, but both church and culture manage to make a mess of this as well. It’s partly that there can be a surprising amount of resistance to new discoveries of truth, especially by religion – in the 1600s the Church famously declared Galileo a heretic for saying the earth revolved around the sun; even when the evidence is overwhelming, knowledge can be seen as a threat. But it’s also the case that things get pretty murky even when there are ‘scientific’ claims to truth. In our information age, you can find a counter-claim to almost any claim, and valid or not people latch on to both sides. And when new assertions of knowledge have implications for how we do things – whether it is issues of climate

change or gender identity or racial bias – then things get very heated very quickly. It might sound simple just to celebrate how human knowledge progresses and our understanding of truth with it – but it’s not so simple: what’s your list of knowledge? – I guarantee you someone has a list different than yours.

TRUTH CHANGES – ok – this is the part where we get to the Scripture. John 16 – Jesus says to his disciples: ‘I still have many things to say to you – but you cannot bear them now – so, I will send you a list of the truth.’ This is the part where I see if you are paying attention! – Jesus did not say he would send a list! Jesus said that he would send the Spirit of Truth. Because truth is not a list – truth is the person and presence and Spirit of God. We’re in the Gospel of John – so when we hear Jesus mention truth, alarm bells should go off – flashing lights that remind us that before this in John 14 Jesus says ‘I am the way and the truth and the life’; and that after this in John 18 as Jesus stands before Pilate they have a discussion about truth, and as Pilate gives his best portrayal of cultural relativism by saying “what is truth?”, there is Jesus the Truth standing before him! – not a list, but a person. When Jesus says ‘the Spirit of Truth will come’, Jesus is talking about himself – about the presence of the Risen Lord among us – which is the truth of life, of grace, of hope, of peace, present within us. Which gives an entirely different meaning to what *TRUTH CHANGES* means: it means that the Spirit’s presence within and among us changes us! - *TRUTH CHANGES* means that the presence of God’s grace and power, the Spirit’s gifts and peace, the Risen Lord’s life and love, changes things – changes us – changes this world. Truth is not a list – truth is the Spirit of God among us – shaping, changing, our lives into a reflection of the God who made us and who calls us.

You see, this sermon was written this week by this community, teaching me about what *TRUTH CHANGES* means. I spoke with one of you who wondered: ‘what if we started in our faith not with doctrine but with practice – with the practices that reflect God’s call; what if we defined our faith first by things like hospitality and justice and the fruits and gifts of the Spirit?’ That really got me thinking – it speaks of our faith not as a list of beliefs but as a pattern of practices formed by the Spirit. In John 16 Jesus says that the Spirit of Truth will glorify him - my paraphrase is that the Spirit’s job is to make us make Jesus look good through us! – which is to say, that the Spirit among us creates in us the practices, the ways of life and patterns of grace, that bring glory to our Lord.

TRUTH CHANGES

This sermon was written as I spoke to one of you who shared a witness of how the Spirit brought change in his life in ways he would not have predicted or imagined. I suppose in some ways you could say it was a change in a list of truth – certain things believed about people and about God. But mostly it was about how the Spirit of God changed, created, opened up in him a way of seeing others that was so full of life and blessing – not a list at all, but the Spirit’s gifts. It doesn’t mean this person has everything figured out; but it did mean we could rejoice together in the Spirit of Truth at work among us. In this passage Jesus seems to be saying it takes some time for us to hear all God has to say to us – that’s true! – but it was as this person was committed to practicing his faith in community that the Spirit of God changed some other things too. That’s how it is for all of us – practice God’s grace, together, and the Spirit of truth will keep changing you, changing us.

This sermon was written in reflecting on the saints of Hope Church that we have given thanks to God for recently – people who witness with their lives that the Spirit of Truth changes our lives and this world. Not easy lives or an easy world – not a list of guarantees or static list of beliefs – but the real stuff of the Spirit of Truth giving life to them and bringing life to others through them. In the words of Proverbs, it is the call of Wisdom – the creative power of God: ‘to you I call, O people- my cry is to all who live!’ – the Spirit of God moving through the world to create true life, to bring real change.

So today if you want to make some people a little nervous about Hope Church, you could say: ‘at Hope Church we believe the Truth Changes!’ – but then instead of comparing truth lists, you can share in your living how the Spirit of Truth changes your life – you can practice the presence of grace and hope and compassion and justice and peace in your life. On Trinity Sunday we do not worship a list: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – we worship the One God who is revealed to us as the living truth that changes us more and more into God’s image. Even as we say the Nicene Creed today, try thinking of it not so much as a list as a witness – a witness to those who over the centuries have had their lives changed by the Spirit of Truth; as the Creed says, ‘the Lord and Giver of Life’ – moving in, shaping, our lives and our world.

People of God, there is good news for us today:

TRUTH CHANGES – the Spirit of Truth changes us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.