

Can We Handle The Truth

First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida

Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

John 16:12-15 (MsgB)

"I still have many things to tell you, but you can't handle them now. [13] But when the Friend comes, the Spirit of the Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is. He won't draw attention to himself, but will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I have done and said. [14] He will honor me; he will take from me and deliver it to you. [15] Everything the Father has is also mine. That is why I've said, 'He takes from me and delivers to you.'

TOO HARD TO HANDLE

In the movie, *A Few Good Men*, the military prosecutor loudly shouts at the witness, "I want the truth!" And the witness (played by Jack Nicholson) fires back with disdain, "You can't handle the truth."

That's how our lesson for today begins. Jesus tells the disciples, "You can't handle the truth. There are some things that are just too much for you to bear right now."

Certainly Jesus tried to tell them the truth. He told them that a disciple would betray him. He told them that a disciple would deny him. He told them that he himself would be crucified. It was the truth. But, they couldn't handle it.

Is there a truth that you just can't handle? All of us have from time to time been faced with a truth that is just too hard to handle. The doctor gives us some bad news about our health.

We can't believe that a loved one is addicted to alcohol, and so we inadvertently become a part of the problem by enabling their destructive behavior. Someone confronts us with the truth about a shortcoming that is destroying a friendship, and we don't want to hear it. We say, "It's not my problem. It's her problem." Perhaps we have failed at something that we really wanted to do. And yet we can't admit it and go on to something else. We just hang on to a dream that has obviously failed.

One of the problems of hanging with Jesus is that he won't let us run away from the truth. Sometimes he gives us a truth that is just too hard for us to handle.

WHAT IS TRUTH?

When Jesus was on trial he told Pilate that he had come to “bear witness to the truth.” Pilate responded cynically, “What is truth?”

Pilate hadn't washed his hands of Jesus yet, but he was well down the road to doing so. And the first step in that process was to trivialize the truth or act like the truth didn't exist. If truth is a relative matter, then no one can be held accountable for their actions.

Have you ever heard someone excuse the actions of a crooked politician (who happens to agree with that person's political philosophy) by saying, “Well, they all do it. He just got caught”?

In this country we have become experts at overlooking facts that we don't want to face. How did Al Gore put it in his movie about global warming? He referred to it as “An Inconvenient Truth.”

The truth is often hard to handle, especially that inconvenient truth about us.

We would prefer to believe that we would never betray or deny Jesus. We prefer to believe that our way is righteous and just. We think that we, unlike all those other people, can handle the truth.

We're wrong.

A TRUTH WE DON'T WANT TO HEAR

The first step in spiritual growth is to recognize that there are some things that we just can't bear right now. There are some things that we have to deny because they don't fit into our view of ourselves and the way we want things to be.

Why do you think that Jesus caused such controversy among the religious and political leaders of his day? He told them a truth that they didn't want to hear.

He told them that God's way was to welcome the misfit and forgive the enemy. He told them that righteous actions were more important than fastidious religious ceremonies and nitpicking doctrine. He told them that God's kingdom was not just about their nation; it was about welcoming and saving the whole world.

He told them that God's kingdom was more important than making money off of the poor people who were coming to the Temple to make an offering. He told would be disciples that if they wanted to follow him, it would involve sacrifice, taking up a cross and walking behind him on the road to Jerusalem.

These were just a few of the hard truths that Jesus told people. They couldn't hear. The truth was just too hard to handle.

Do you really think that we are any different from those first disciples? Do you really think that we are better able to hear that inconvenient truth about ourselves?

In the movie, "Meet the Parents," Robert De Niro plays a former CIA agent who decides to interrogate his future son-in-law. He grabs the young man's hands with a certain hold and begins asking him questions. He tells his daughter's bewildered boyfriend that by mere touch he has been trained to do a lie detector test.

Of course the humor in that is the idea that the difference between lies and the truth can be distinguished so easily. We sometimes can't even tell if we're lying to ourselves ... much less if someone else is telling a lie.

Have you ever been in court when people put their hands on the Bible and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth? And then these same people tell stories that are so different that you know one of them has to be lying. But, which one is it? Sometimes the truth is hard to find.

In response to a truth that is hard to find or hard to accept, many of us have taken Pilate's approach. We throw up our hands and ask, "What is truth? Who knows? The truth is too hard to find. I have my truth and you have yours. Let's just leave it at that."

A FRIEND WHO TELLS US THE TRUTH

But, Jesus left his disciples a way to find the truth, even the truth that was hard to bear. He left them the Holy Spirit. Notice that in today's lesson the Spirit is called the Spirit of truth.

This is a very important role that the Spirit plays, a role that is often ignored. The Spirit helps disciples hear that truth that is hard to handle. The Spirit is like a good friend who takes us by the hand and leads us into the truth.

Have you ever had a friend who was able to tell you anything? Perhaps you haven't had a friend like that. It's rare. But, some of us have had a friend that was so close that he or she could even take us by the hand and tell us those things that we would rather not hear. They did it because they loved us.

It is the same with Jesus. He loves so much that he does not leave us to our self imposed delusions. His Spirit comes to us and tells us the truth about what it means to be His

disciple.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the only Sunday in the church year that is focused on a doctrine. We believe that God has revealed Himself in three ways, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If the preacher is brave enough or foolish enough to preach on the Trinity, the whole sermon is usually spent trying to explain this doctrine. How can there be one God who exists simultaneously in three different ways?

I think that such discussions inevitably lead to frustration. People eventually just throw up their hands and say, "I guess we'll just have to take it on faith." Translated that means, "This is a riddle that is just too hard to understand."

Certainly God is above and beyond us, and we cannot figure God out on our own. But, the doctrine of the Trinity is about the fact that God has chosen to reveal Himself. God has chosen to communicate His truth to us. God loves us so much that God does not want us to remain in the dark about what it all means.

So how does the infinite, all knowing creator God make himself known to us? His Word becomes flesh and dwells among us. God sends His Son into the world to tell us the truth, the truth about ourselves and the truth about God. It is a revelation that we could not have guessed or discovered on our own. In some cases it's not a message that we would particularly like to hear. But, in the human face of Jesus we see the face of God.

In our lesson for today Jesus is giving the last part of His farewell address. Jesus is leaving his disciples. How can they remember all that Jesus taught them, the truth that was so hard for them to hear and understand in the first place?

Jesus said, "You will be reminded of the truth about the Father that I have taught you. The Spirit will remind you. The Spirit will inspire you. The Spirit will make sense out of all that I have done and said. The Spirit will tell you the truth."

INSPIRED SCRIPTURE, INSPIRED PEOPLE

This means, first of all, that the Spirit of God in Christ is active in development of Scripture. In 2 Timothy 3:16 we read that all Scripture is "inspired by God."

The word literally means "God-breathed." And since Scripture is God-breathed, then it has an important role to play in our faith development. It tells us the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I like the way that the Message amplifies this verse. It translates 2 Timothy 3:16,

"Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way."