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May 21, 2017

Acts 17:22-31

John 14:15-21

## THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

A while back, my family saw a musical. Let me tell you about the last scene. A dynamic leader is on stage, however, even with his great leadership, his followers have repeatedly failed to rise to his vision for them. The audience gets to hear the forgiving, kingly figure beg anyone who will listen to respond to the words he sings, “Ask ev’ry person if (they’ve) heard the story, and tell it strong and clear if (they) have not, that once there was a fleeting wisp of glory called ...Camelot. Don’t let it be forgot that once there was a spot for one brief, shining moment that was known as Camelot.”<sup>1</sup> King Arthur longs for the story to be recalled and retold. John’s Gospel longs for us to step into the theater of the drama of Jesus’ life and ministry. In our passage today, Jesus knows the curtain is about to go down on his life. His closest followers are about to abandon or betray him. We might expect Jesus to express a similar sentiment that gets sung about in Camelot. Perhaps this is a time when he would beckon his followers to focus on the memories of what they had shared together. They could go back through what they had seen and heard, for it was truly “a fleeting wisp of glory.” “Don’t let it be forgot that once there was a spot for one brief, shining moment...”

However, Jesus doesn’t sing that song. His words are lyrically rich and his tone connects with us at the core of our being, but he is not calling his followers to just a fond nostalgia. He does not want them to hold up his life simply as little more than a memory. Rather he longs for them to experience his life as a continuing loving presence. Even though he would not physically be with them, he tells them, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.” It’s an odd thing to say right before his death, but he would be with them and with all believers in a different way than he had previously been with them. In John’s Gospel, he is described as God’s Word made flesh. He had been with

those who became his followers. Earlier that evening this down-to-earth Living Word had bent down to wash his followers' feet. But that presence was about to take on a different form. The very same Spirit that guided and empowered Jesus' ministry would be present with them and in them.

Jesus describes this Spirit as a gift from God who would be another advocate to be with them. He identifies it as the Spirit of truth. Did you notice the expiration date on this gift from God? It would be with the followers of Jesus, not just for a fleeting period of time, but for the rest of time going forward. That same Spirit is present with us two millennia later. But how do we recognize this Spirit of truth in our lives? During his rise to fame, Stephen Colbert coined a new word – truthiness. Merriam Webster selected it as the number one word a few years ago. Truthiness is “the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.”<sup>2</sup> Some who talk about being led by the Spirit end up getting led by their own wishes and desires instead. It is not the Spirit of truthiness that God has given to us as followers of Jesus Christ. A lot of personal and public decisions get made based on what people simply wished to be true. But the Spirit of truth can help us move past half-truths and mistruths to accept what is true, even when it may lead to some difficult changes. The life of faith does not have to ignore facts. We don't have to steer clear of inconvenient or frightening realities as we make decisions. By the power of God's Spirit, we can face difficulties head on and heart on. Believers aren't to live a life of make believe. God is not threatened by what is scientifically true, for God made what is scientifically true. But there is also truth that science can't determine. We don't ask a scientist to tell us what our purpose in life is or what God's will for us is. The Spirit of truth can lead us toward those truths.

How do we recognize this Spirit of truth? We identify the Spirit as One who leads toward a broad, not a narrow truth. In our lesson from the Book of Acts, we heard the Apostle Paul speaking to the people of Athens, who thought of themselves as the intelligentsia of their day. He finds what is common between their beliefs and his own and seeks to build from there. Paul's ministry reflects the Spirit of broad truth that can meet the innermost needs of those who are

formally educated and those who are differently educated. It can address those who are rich and poor in money, those who are rich and poor in relationships. It is there for those who have great power over the course of events and those who feel like they are voiceless. It is not limited to a particular culture. The Spirit is broadly true because of the breadth of God's love that it communicates.

The Spirit of truth also leads us beyond shallowness toward a depth of truth. It will not just keep us on the surface of relationships with God or neighbor, for divine love calls us to go deeper, and the divine presence enables us to do so. The Spirit beckons us to move beyond the simplistic, shallow answers to tough questions. It can handle ambiguity. Even when we lack understanding, we don't lack for the Spirit's loving embrace. It can also work on our resistance to go where God leads. We may not want to believe that we have a need to be reconciled with someone from whom we are estranged or that we need some help with an addiction. We may not be thrilled that we need to change our practices in order to live in healthier relationship with God's creation. The Spirit of God can lead us to deeper truths about ourselves, and to understand and to provide what we need for deep healing and for a depth of meaning.

This is the Spirit who leads us toward timely truth. It is helpful for us to know about 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine and what was happening with the earliest followers of Christ. But we live today in our own context and the Spirit of truth connects us to that which is totally relevant to our lives and the life of the world. The significance of what Jesus had been teaching them in word and in deed was not limited to just his first followers' situation. The Spirit of Jesus meets us where we are and moves us toward God's good intent.

For a variety of reasons, it is rare when I quote a politician, but this day I lift up the words of Robert Kennedy when he said, "There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why... I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?"<sup>3</sup> Even though we are inspired by the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, his Spirit does not lead us on just a nostalgic trip to a shining moment

long ago. Instead of a focus on the ‘once was’, we are directed to the ‘could be.’ The Spirit inspires us to dream and then, by God’s grace, involves us in moving toward what is yet to be. The Spirit of truth enables us to carry forward the ministry of Jesus Christ. God is continuing to write that story, and we not only get to be an audience to witness it – we get to be a part of living it. King Arthur had his fleeting wisp of glory in folklore and on the stage. But we have within us the Spirit of the One whose glory is neither fleeting nor wispy. The stage on which this all plays out is of both cosmic and cardiac size. It isn’t Camelot – it is the very reign of our loving God. Recognize and welcome the Spirit; live out that gospel truth.

<sup>1</sup> Camelot, lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> American Dialect Society, January 2006