

“Serving Truth”

Sermon for Last Sunday of Pentecost: November 22, 2009 by Rev. Joe Summers

I want to talk today about truth, and I want to begin the song “Seek and You Shall Find” and three stories Pete Seeger tells when singing that song.

“Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened. Ask and it will be given, when the love comes tumbling down.”

There was a king in the olden days. He had 3 sons, and he wanted to give them a good education. He called in his three wise men, and he said: “I want you to boil down all the world’s wisdom into one book, and then I’m going to give it to my sons and have them learn it. So they went away, and they were gone a whole year, and they came back with a little leather bound volume all trimmed in gold. The king leafed through it... “hmmm... very good... hmmm-- yes this is it.” So he gave it to his sons and said “Learn it.” Then he turned to the wise men and said--”you know you did such a good job on this. I wonder if you could boil down all the world’s wisdom into one sentence.” Well, the wise men went away, and they were gone five whole years, and when they came back, their beards must have been dragging on the ground, and they said, “your majesty, we’ve decided upon the sentence. “What is it?”, said the king. And they said, “This too shall pass.”

I guess the king didn’t have anything better to do, so he said to the wise men, “I wonder if you could boil down all the world’s wisdom into one word. The poor men must have groaned as they went away. It took them ten whole years, and when they came back, they were all bent over. The king said, “Oh yes, what was that word?” He had apparently forgotten about his little whim. And they said, “Your majesty, the one word is --”maybe.”

“Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened. Ask and it will be given, when the love comes tumbling down.”

There was another king in another country in the old days, and he was sitting in his palace when, one day, a messenger came in and said “Your majesty, your majesty, a sea captain has landed on your coast, and in the hold of his vessel is a strange animal called an elephant”. Well, the king was busy enjoying himself, so he said to his wise men-- “I want you to go down and bring me a report.” So the wise men got into the carriages, and they all went down to the coast and then went aboard the ship. But you know, they had all been reading books for so long that they were all blind as bats. The first wise man felt the leg of the elephant, and he said--”hmmm.” The next one felt the side of the elephant, and he said---”hmmmm.” The next one felt the ear of the elephant, and he said-----”hmmm.” The fourth one felt the tusk of the elephant. The next one, the trunk of the elephant. And the last one pulled on the elephant’s tail.

They all got back into the carriage and went back to the king, and the king said, “well what manner of beast is this elephant?” The first wise men came up and bowed low and said

“your majesty, this elephant is very like unto the trunk of a small tree.” “You are completely wrong”, said the next one--“I felt it myself--its very like the side of a building.” The next one said, “you both are wrong--it’s like the leaf of a large plant.” “No, no, no” said the fourth, “it’s like a small spear.” “No, no, no, no--its like a large snake. Then the last one came up and said--”your majesty, your majesty, you know I’m right, it’s like a rope hanging down from heaven; you pull on it, and the heavens open up with waste.

“Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened. Ask and it will be given, when the love comes tumbling down.

There once were two maggots; you know, little worms. They were sitting on the handle of a shovel, and the shovel was in a wood shed. Well, early in the morning, a workman came to get the shovel, and put it over his shoulder, and started walking down the street. Well, the two little maggots tried to hold on as long as they could, but they eventually jiggled off. One fell down into the crack of the sidewalk. The other fell onto the curb and from there onto a cat, a very dead cat. Well, the second one ate and ate and ate for three whole days, and when he just couldn’t eat any more he said, “(yawn) I think I’ll go look for my brother.” He humped himself over the curb and toward the crack in the sidewalk, and he leaned over and said, “hello--are you down there brother?”

A weak shaky voice replied: “Yes I’m down here all right, and I’ve been down here for three whole days without a bite to eat and without a drop to drink. I’m nearly starving to death. But you, you are so sleek and fat--to what do you attribute your success?”

“Brains and personality brother-brains and personality!”

“Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened. Ask and it will be given, when the love comes tumbling down. “

There was once man, and while digging in a field, he unearthed a very large diamond. So he sold everything he had and purchased that field, so he could own that diamond.

The truth is more precious than the most precious diamond in the world. Like that diamond, it is multi-faceted. As finite creatures we can almost never see it from all its different dimensions at the same time, but if we are open to the perspective of others, we can begin to comprehend the greater truth. However, if we are not open to the perspectives of others, we are like those arrogant, blind, wise men who insisted that the part of the elephant they felt was the whole elephant.

But truth must also be honored. The moment we turn it into our possession, it escapes us. This is what we see in Pontius Pilate. One of the most brutal and powerful rulers in the Roman Empire, Pilate has no conception of what the truth is. For him truth has always been whatever he

says it is, as he sought to manipulate and control others. I meet many people who don't believe in truth and, like Pilate, they are lost souls, because they have no means of really seeing themselves, and without some ability to see yourself, you can't know where you are in the world or how to get to a different place.

In contrast, we see Jesus in today's gospel say that, unlike earthly kings, what he is really about is, not power over others, but about being a witness to the truth, a servant of the truth.

“Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened. Ask and it will be given, when the love comes tumbling down.”

Jesus said, “the truth will set you free”. When you are servant of the truth, it frees you from having to hide anything, or deny anything, or lie, or manipulate the truth.

It's also a place of a certain kind of protection, for Jesus also said that, ultimately, the truth is about a God who loves all and seeks the well being of all, which means that, if someone is coming at us to punish us with the truth, to harm us with something they claim is true--we know it's not the whole truth, so we don't have to be so afraid. We can be open to what they have to say, without fearing it's the ultimate truth. This is part of the power we see in Jesus. Again and again, he is open in situations where we would be tempted to shut down, like talking to people in power who wish to harm him. Whether he is talking to the religious authorities, or political leaders, or, as we see today--the most powerful person in his part of the ancient world--he can treat them simply like other human beings. He can engage them in real conversations, such as the conversation today about truth--rather than getting all defensive, when they attack him. It is powerful ground to stand on. If you can go through your life not fearing the truth but yearning to know the whole truth--knowing that, in the end, this will be best for all---it puts you in a totally different relationship to yourself and others and life.

“Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened. Ask and it will be given, when the love comes tumbling down.”

When, at his trial, Jesus is accused of blasphemy for things like disagreeing with parts of the scriptures and saying things like the beloved temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed--he then says that he indeed is the Christ, the Son of God, and that his accusers will see “The Son of Man” (which can also be translated as the human one) “seated at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven.”

That phrase refers back to the section of the book of Daniel, which we heard today, where Daniel speaks of a vision in which he sees: “One like a human being coming with the clouds of

heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented to him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, all nations, and all languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.”

We still await the rule of the human one--the time when it is done on earth as it is in heaven:

The time when the poor in spirit, rather than experiencing the reign of death, experience the reign of heaven.

The time when those who mourn are no longer left desolate but are comforted.

The time when the meek, the powerless, rather than having the little they have taken from them--- inherit the earth.

The time when those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, rather than being driven mad-- are satisfied.

The time when the merciful, rather than being abused--are treated mercifully by others.

The time when the pure in heart, rather than being tortured-- see God.

The time when, rather than being called fools and traitors-- peacemakers are called the Children of God.

The time of the reign of the Human One can begin, here and now, if we will each commit ourselves to becoming servants of the truth, the whole truth, God's truth.

For, if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.