

Truth Dazzles Gradually

John 1:29-42

Second Sunday after Epiphany, (Jan. 16) 2022

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*Tell all the truth but tell it slant —*

*Success in Circuit lies*

*Too bright for our infirm Delight*

*The Truth's superb surprise*

*As Lightning to the Children eased*

*With explanation kind*

*The Truth must dazzle gradually*

*Or every man be blind —*

- Emily Dickinson

In today's Scripture, there are a lot of folks wondering and asking of Jesus, "Who is this guy?" and "What's he about?" They know that John the Baptist has just baptized Jesus and has referred to him as the Lamb of God. They know John is treating Jesus with deference and there is some expectation that Jesus might be the Messiah. But who is he really? If he is the Messiah, what kind of Messiah?

Jesus notices their curiosity and asks, "What are you looking for?" They respond somewhat strangely, "Where are you staying?" Not "who is your family?" Not "where are you originally from?" Not "What is your mission?" Or even, "Who are you?" But "Where are you staying?"

What they are looking for, what they seek, is not so much the information of the teacher, otherwise Jesus could have handed them his book or directed them to his website. No, they want to know *him*. The word we translate as “staying” is one of John’s favorite words and refers to the root and depth of one’s life and meaning over time. Perhaps you’ll more readily recognize the word by its older translation: abide. So, when these two disciples ask Jesus, “Where are you staying?” they’re not simply asking “Where do you live?” but also “How do you live?” “What is it that sustains you?”

Over in chapter 15, John uses the same word when Jesus urges us to “abide in me, and I in you” (15:4). What Jesus is telling us and what John emphasizes, is that knowing Jesus involves being with Jesus over time. It is not a “come and go” event where we shake Jesus’ hand and run on to the next engagement. It is not spending a quick hour a weekend. It takes time.

Jesus responds to these questioners encouragingly, “Come and see.” Then John tells us, “They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained (abided) with him that day.” Here, in a simple and understated way, John gives us the essence of Christian discipleship. Discipleship is not primarily listening or learning and mastering information; it is not watching a movie or reading the Cliff Notes. It is moving in with Jesus. It is soaking and immersing ourselves in Jesus and the Jesus Community. It means plunging into the deep. And it takes time.

Come and see. Jesus invites us to meet him, abide with him, move in with him, remain with him. What we discover over time is that he is always turning toward us and inviting us to come. At first, we think we’re going to move into Jesus’ house, but after awhile we begin to see that his house is our true home and what Jesus is doing is welcoming us home.

That's why we consider the greatest of all of Jesus' parables to be the Parable of the Prodigal Son, where the waiting father runs down the road to welcome the son home. That's the essence of the gospel, the news that is good. We are the son who ran off, the child who is suspicious and afraid but comes home because we're hungry and tired. Instead of facing a slammed door, we are welcomed and loved. Come home. Come and see.

This is the gospel. Paul said, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation" (II Cor. 5:19).

Remember the story of Jacob and Esau way back in the Old Testament? Jacob's whole life had been nothing but one big fight after another. Jacob was a life-long con-artist and fighter. Even before he was born, he and his twin brother Esau fought it out in the womb to see who the firstborn would be. As he grows up, he fights with his father, his father-in-law, his brother, his wives, and finally he was facing another big fight with his brother Esau, whom he had long ago defrauded of his birthright and Esau had years of anger to nurse.

After years of fighting and struggling, Esau comes to meet Jacob bringing 400 men with him. That night Jacob goes through another fight, but with God, who wounds him with a blessing so that the next morning Jacob says, "I have seen the face of God and lived."

The next day when facing his estranged brother, instead of a fight Jacob discovers healing and reconciliation. His brother embraces him, and Jacob responds, "Your face is like the face of God to me." One night he discovers the face of God. The next morning, he recognizes it in his brother.

These kinds of stories tell us who we are and who God is. Everything we know and believe is conditioned by the expectation of healing and justice and reconciliation. We are reconciled with God, and when we are, we discover that reconciliation in the faces of our sisters and brothers, our neighbors, even those we have considered our enemies. And if we had forgotten this, or perhaps we never really knew it in the first place, then here in our story today is Jesus asking us to come and see, come home with him.

But. And there's always a "but." Linguistics scholar Deborah Tannen says that contemporary life in America is the "Argument Culture," which she says is not simply about diversity and difference but polarization and division. In other words, like Jacob of long ago, we spend our lives in a fight. We live in the presence of our enemies. We're mad and they're mad. We're in conflict with someone or something all the time. We are angry and in an argument with each other, with God (if we believe in a god), with ourselves, and with this world around us. Everything's a fight; everything's a competition; everything's a struggle.

And when Jesus invites us to come home, to come and see, in his presence we are shown the truth of it all. When Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who died last week, submitted the final report of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he said, "Fellow South Africans accept this report as a way, an indispensable way of healing, where we have looked the beast in the eye." This is what Kierkegaard had in mind when he insisted, "The wound must be kept open in order that the eternal may heal it." You see, when we abide with Jesus, we're just getting started.

When we come to Jesus, we are told the truth of the way things are; we look the beast in the eye. For example, when Simon Peter first met Jesus, he fell down

and cried, “Get away from me! For I am a man with an unclean heart!” That day he ended up dropping his fishing nets and following Jesus. The rest of Simon Peter’s story through the Gospels, through the Book of Acts, and over in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, is story of his continually being converted to Christ. Again and again, he makes bold stands of faith, and again and again, he fails and sins. And over and over he is forgiven and changed further.

For Simon Peter himself, it took years, a lifetime, of learning to follow Jesus. He kept on. He kept following. He kept learning. He kept facing new truth. He kept facing his own sin, confessing his sin, kept being forgiven, and kept growing in Christ. He faced new truth, more truth, and he kept growing in truth. He abided.

Being a disciple of Christ, is often like an onion in which Christ peels the layers off. We tend to think, there is one big event, one big conversion where we confess and ask for forgiveness and the one big layer is peeled away, then we’re done. But in fact, the more we move in with Jesus and abide with him, the more layers we see that must be peeled away. The more truth we come to see.

Dealing with things like racism takes a lifetime. We are a congregation who does not want to be prejudiced but over time, if we abide with Christ, we learn that racism is not simply about prejudice toward another person because of their skin color. We discover that racism is systemic and social and pervasive and stretches over time in ways that is much larger than our individual lives. Sin in general and racism, as a particular version of sin, is something we’re in and not simply something we do. At the same time we learn how it is inside of us, too. We learn unpleasant truths about ourselves and our parents and our ancestors. It takes time to face these new truths. It’s hard and we do not particularly like it.

Howard Thurman famously said that racism is so deep that it can only be removed by soaking.

Sin and Death like racism, or violence, or bigotries of all sorts, and fear, and hatred, and on and on, oppress us from the outside and inside of us become kinds of psychoses and addictions (see Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories*, p. 41). It is why every time Jesus healed in the New Testament – every time! – it was disruptive and controversial. People, especially people in power, did not like facing the truth that there were flaws in their systems of living (see Myers, p. 41). In the New Testament, and today, sometimes it is easier to just stay sick.

It might be easier, but it is not the truth. It is not what God has created us and called us to be. The truth is that in the presence of Jesus we can begin to repent, be forgiven, start learning to be reconciled, and made whole. When Jesus invites us home, to come and see, it is the first step. The next step is that we face the beast – we face the beast of our own lives and in society around us – and then the healing begins. We begin to see differently, and we begin to act differently. Slowly and over time. Again and again.

A major challenge in White American Christianity is will we remain, abide long enough to be changed into who Christ calls us to be? Our tendency is when things get uncomfortable, or we're challenged, or we are faced with things we do not agree with, we respond with either fight or flight. Nevertheless, the call of Christ is to "come and see" and stick with it.

Emily Dickinson wrote, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant- /... The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind." There are some things, and Truth is one of them, that can be understood rightly only if we understand them over time. The very essence of Truth is that it can only be known slowly, in bits and

pieces that are chewed on, meditated on, reflected over, talked about, practiced, and then practiced some more with others living with the same Truth.

Gradually, as we come to know the Truth of Jesus Christ, we may be dazzled. Gradually, as we are transformed from people of argument and conflict into people of repentance, healing, and reconciliation, we are able to see the dazzling brightness of Jesus and his Way of Peace and Shalom and Justice for the entire world.

Years ago, we took a bunch of our youth to a meeting in Dallas to hear Shane Claiborne, a young Christian who is serious about following Jesus and who works with people in poverty in Philadelphia. Part of Shane's conversion came during a summer with Mother Teresa in Calcutta. He had read about her and heard what she was doing, and he was fed up with the standard and conventional Christianity here in the U. S., so yearning to find a real Christian, he picked up the phone and called the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta. An old raspy voice answered, "Hullo." He identified himself and said he was looking for the Missionaries of Charity or Mother Teresa. The voice on the other end said, "This is the Missionaries of Charity. This is Mother Teresa." He was floored and didn't know what to say. She was answering the phone. He asked if he could come for a few weeks and work with her and the other Missionaries of Charity. She said, "Come for the summer." He asked, "Where will I eat and sleep?" She said, "God takes care of the lilies and the sparrows, and God will take care of you. Just come." And finally, he asked, "What's it like serving in Calcutta?" She replied, "Come and see."

Austin Heights, we live in a gun-toting society, fear-mongering society, but we learn to say, "Come and see our weapons of the Spirit: love, joy, grace, and

peace.” We live where people fear and are hostile to LGBTQ folks, we say, “Come and see a people who are known by the love of Jesus Christ, and where our LGBTQ sisters and brothers are safe.”

Because of the grace of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit, we are a network, a community of Christ followers who pray for one another, and who learn to trust one another enough, so it is safe for all of us while we patiently discover and face the truth of our psychoses and addictions and are healed. We learn to stick with the healing because we’re not alone. God is with us and we’re with one another.

And we support one another and are the one body of Christ as we battle the Powers of Sin and Death and Darkness outside of us, too. We battle for voting rights and dealing with climate change, we feed people, and so much more. All the while, where so many are alienated, bruised, and battered by how hard and mean it is out there, we open the door, open our arms, and say, “Come and see.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.