

26th Sunday after Pentecost
Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 3:6-13
November 13, 2016

Keep the Faith

This morning's sermon will focus on three texts – two from the Bible and the other from a source less authoritative but nonetheless instructive. I hope you will forgive me if I start with the non-biblical text.

It comes from the *Book of Order*, which is part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The language I am about to read to you is old-fashioned because it comes from a statement issued by the Synod of New York and Philadelphia back in 1788. These words were penned by men wearing knee britches and powdered wigs, and its cadences ring strangely on our ears, but please try to listen carefully. The words are old-fashioned, but they are uncannily timely in the wake of last Tuesday's election.

Here is what those 18th century Presbyterians declared:

That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior's rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them." And that no opinion can be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man's opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.¹

Do you hear what our ancestors are telling us this morning?

First, they are saying this: *Faith matters*. A person's core convictions count, and the best way to tell what people truly believe -- who they truly are -- deep down in their hearts -- is to look at how they live their lives. There is, as the old guys in the wigs put it, "an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty."

That's the first point. *Faith matters*.

¹ *Book of Order* 2015/17, p. 12

And the second point is this: *Truth matters.*

Of course, people see the world from different perspectives and operate out of different cultural narratives, but ultimately speaking, truth is not relative. None of us *possesses* the truth. Opinions differ, and we must all practice what those old guys in wigs called “mutual forbearance toward each other.” Nevertheless, truth is not equivalent to falsehood.

In other words, you can’t just make stuff up. Truth and “truthiness” are not the same thing.

Keeping in mind those hallowed principles – faith matters and truth matters -- I am now going to say some things about the consequences of last week’s election that some of you might find offensive. I am trying my best not to be partisan. What I’m trying to do is to look through these two lenses – the lens of truth and the lens of faith -- at what we now face as Christians in America.

So, here we go. Jesus said, “**By their fruits ye shall know them.**” The fruits that I see thus far in Donald Trump are racial bigotry, xenophobia, misogyny, and narcissism. These fruits are self-evident. They have nothing to do with his party affiliation or his skill as a marvelously successful politician. These fruits spring not from any political party, but from the heart of the president-elect.

Now, the heart can change. If that were not the case, there would be no place for the gospel and no hope for any of us. All of us are sinners who fall short of God’s glory, and all of us bear some questionable fruit. We are all a work in progress, dependent always on the grace and mercy of God.

Donald Trump is not the devil. He’s a child of God and a sinner who has a long way to go. Judging by his fruits thus far, he will need a lot of help if he is to rise to the office to which he has been elected.

Please hear me. I am not saying that everyone who voted for Mr. Trump is a bigot, a xenophobe, a misogynist, or a narcissist. People vote for all sorts of complicated reasons.

However, it is clear that this presidential campaign has exposed, and in many ways emboldened, dark forces within the body politic – forces that I naively thought had died a natural death. This campaign has revealed aspects of our national character that are deeply embarrassing and profoundly troubling.

Of course, I could be wrong. I'm not saying that I possess the truth or that I'm seeing the whole picture. And I'm certainly not making moral judgments about people who voted for Mr. Trump.

The old saying goes, "What you see is what you get." There is little about Donald Trump that we have not seen, whether by self-revelation or unearthed videos. He is our president-elect, warts and all, and we must pray for him.

In the wake of Mr. Trump's election and anticipating his presidency, you and I will have to make some important decisions about how to be the church of Jesus Christ. For instance:

- Will we continue to insist that climate change is a pressing and urgent moral issue? Or will we remove those solar panels and stick our heads in the sand?
- The next time farm workers from Central and South Florida travel up to Tallahassee to lobby the legislature, will we give them food and shelter in the name of Jesus Christ?

Will we say "*Bienvenidos*, Welcome, whether you have green cards or not. Will we stand with them? Will we go to jail with them should the immigration police arrive to divide their families?

- Already, racial epithets are turning up scrawled on walls in public high schools and women are reporting on social media that they are being called a word I can't repeat from this pulpit – a word that features prominently in what the president-elect calls his "locker-room talk."

Will the church of Jesus Christ look the other way? Or will we continue to teach our children to honor and love their neighbors?

These are decisions we will face. And by our fruits the world will know us.

I said when I began this sermon that I would deal with two of today's readings from the Bible. On Wednesday morning, as I opened my Bible, I was drawn right away to that apocalyptic text in Luke's Gospel – the one about the temple being torn down, the appearance of false prophets, about wars and insurrections, and followers of Jesus being arrested and persecuted.

It seemed a text to fit my mood, if not the tenor of the times. All I want to say about that text is that Christians have faced crises before, and so far the world has not come to an end. The silver lining in the cloud of hard times is that they give Christians an opportunity to testify – to bear some fruit, we might say.

A few days before the election took place, Jill Duffield, the editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, wrote:

Now is our opportunity to speak the gospel to the brokenhearted. Now is our opportunity to speak the truth in love. Now is our opportunity to let the world know we are Christ's disciples by our love for one another in a very unloving and too often unlovely world. Now is our opportunity to testify to the power of Jesus Christ to reconcile and forgive, to transform and redeem.

Consider all the tumult, the war, the earthquakes, the suffering and the cruelty. Does not God have a Word to say in the midst of it? Have we not been given a purpose to fulfill in the face of it? Are we not to be a light to the world? Didn't Jesus ask, "Do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know that we love you." "Tend my sheep." Now is our opportunity to testify.²

Jill, my sister in Christ, said it better than I could have said.

But let's not stop with that gloomy passage. Let's also remember that vision of the prophet Isaiah. The day is coming, he says, when the Lord will create **"new heavens and a new earth, when the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind."**

² Jill Duffield, Looking into the Lectionary: 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (November 13), *Presbyterian Outlook*

The prophet envisions a time when there will be no more low-birthweight babies, no more people who die of hypertension and diabetes before they reach a ripe old age, no more displaced refugees who plant but cannot harvest what they planted. **The wolf and the lamb shall feed together . . . They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.**

That's God's vision for all humanity, God's intention for all of creation. That vision is inclusive and joyous and free of all the evils we struggle right now to overcome. As we strive to be faithful now, let us not lose sight of the goal, beloved. Our struggle is to align our lives with God's coming kingdom.

The time is coming, and will surely be, when the transformation of the world begun in Jesus Christ will come to full fruition. Until that day comes, let love trump hate, hospitality overcome fear of the stranger, and open hearts prevail.

Let us bear fruit. And let us trust God, who will not let us go.