

Lead Me in Thy Truth

Acts 17:16-31

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“The human mind is a perpetual factory for idols,” wrote John Calvin. Drawing up this quote the retired Methodist Bishop Will Willimon wrote, “The God whom Paul proclaims is not just another option for human devotion.”

Reading that paragraph reminded me of an episode of the great television show *King of the Hill*. So, if we had the capacity to do so, this is one of those moments I’d play the clip. Unable to do that let me read the scene for you, after some set up. Hank, the no-nonsense Texas father is bothered by his son Bobby’s infatuation with the new youth minister who is trying to be super cool with skateboarding and Christian rock and roll. Throughout the episode Hank appears as an old fart who keeps trying to block Bobby’s religious adventures. The episode ends with Hank taking Bobby into the garage and pulling down a box off of a high shelf, a box that includes lots of Bobby’s old things.

BOBBY: When I turn 18, I'm going to do whatever I want for the Lord. Tattoos, piercings, you name it.

HANK: Well, I'll take that chance. Come here, there's something I want you to see. (Hank takes down a box from the shelf and opens it up) Remember this?

BOBBY: My beanbag buddy? Oh, man, I can't believe I collected those things. They're so lame.

HANK: You didn't think so five years ago. And how about your virtual pet? You used to carry this thing everywhere. Then you got tired of it, forgot to feed it, and it died.

BOBBY (looking at a photo of himself in a Ninja Turtles costume): I look like such a dork.

HANK: I know how you feel. I never thought that "Members Only" jacket would go out of style, but it did. I know you think stuff you're doing now is cool, but in a few years you're going to think it's lame. And I don't want the Lord to end up in this box.

Willimon again: “The God whom Paul proclaims is not just another option for human devotion.”

Last week Randy Solberg e-mailed me a question that arose from his personal bible study. He was reading Mark and had a question about the crucifixion story which led after a

couple of e-mails to the question “Does nationalism make it difficult to follow God?”

I responded:

Nationalism definitely is an idol.

If there is one abiding connection (and there's more than one I think) between testaments Hebrew and Christian is the issue of not putting an idol before God. Statues of Baal are not the concern. The concern is the desire for a God of thunder and war. Roman imperialism is the idol of Jesus and the apostles' time. Consumerism, narcissism, imperialism (again) these are clearly the idols of our time.

In his sermon to the philosophers of Athens, Paul proclaims to them the “God who made the world and everything in it,” the one in whom “we live and move and have our being.” The God who is not simply one choice among many options, but the sovereign creator and redeemer who merits our worship and discipleship. Paul argues that this God is revealed in nature and can be grasped by the human intellect. And that the fullest revelation of God is in the story of Jesus and his resurrection. Something at which some of the philosophers scoff.

This story is, of course, a favorite for those of us who enjoy philosophy. As an intellectual kid growing up, I relished this story. Paul engages intellectuals on their own terms quoting Greek philosophers and poets and proclaiming the Gospel through the concepts and ideas that these thinkers would have understood.

This story creates an ongoing expectation that the Gospel be proclaimed in a way that inspires our best thinking.

I believe that the God who created the universe and everything in it, the God who commands our worship and discipleship, the God who isn't a fad or an idol, is also the One who wants to open our minds and inspire us to think, to imagine, and to question.

The choir's anthem today was taken from Psalm 25, which begins:

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth,
and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord,
and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

What is truth?

In the passage read earlier the American philosopher William James declares that truth

is what is “helpful in life’s practical struggles,” what would help us to lead a better life.

Horace Bushnell, the great 19th century Congregationalist pastor and theologian wrote that truth is “that which *finds* us . . . and thus enters into us.”

John Robinson, the pastor of the Pilgrims, promised them as they departed for the New World that there was yet “more truth and light to break forth from God’s holy word.”

And Prince wrote, “If you were given all the answers and you stopped to wonder why But how will you know the truth?”

So often we think of truth as certainty. Something we can grasp and once grasped it becomes our possession. I believe truth thus understood is an idol. According to the psalmist, truth is a *way*, a path we must follow. Many different voices remind us that truth is something which lives and grows. God is still speaking, we in the United Church of Christ have proclaimed.

In her book *The Evolution of a UCC Style* Randi Jones Walker, professor of church history at the Pacific School of Religion, tried to identify what was the core feature of the United Church of Christ and our predecessor denominations and traditions. She wrote:

Our UCC theological identity has never been found in a concise set of shared beliefs, nor in a common way of worship. It is certainly not found in our polity [which may surprise some of you]. It is found precisely in our doubt. Our identity as the United Church of Christ lies in our doubt of the adequacy of any human containers of the Word of God. We doubt that the depths of God’s Revelation in Jesus Christ have been fully explored. Our identity does not lie in a set teaching or structure, but in a process. Our task today, as it was in our past traditions, is to think more clearly and openly about God, about Christ, about the Church so that we may recover our church’s theological voice, so that the Gospel sings again from our minds, our hearts, and our actions.

Wednesday during our hymn selection conversation, I read this paragraph to Stephen Bouma and he said, “There’s a lot in that.”

If Professor Walker is right, what we most share as a people is our entertainment of doubt, the title of a 38 page chapter in her book tracing that tradition within our history. But we aren’t skeptics who don’t believe anything. Rather we believe that revelation has not ended. That there is still more for us to understand. That any theological formulation is provisional instead of dogmatic, as we learn new things and hear new voices. Rather than a doubt that ends the pursuit of truth, ours is a doubt that leads to thinking more clearly and openly, using our minds as disciples of God.

Professor Walker concludes that the willingness to entertain doubt should lead to a “generosity of spirit” and an “ability to sit with and learn the language of people we find strange and perhaps even uncomfortable.”

We live in an age of questions, of seeking, of doubt. Fortunately, the God we proclaim, the one in whom we live, and move, and have our being, is no idol. The God we worship and follow is the one who made the universe and all that is within it. Including our minds. God does not reside within a box but leads us in the way of truth and salvation, always encouraging us to move deeper in our understanding, wider in our imagination, and richer in our wisdom.

Let us be a people who think more clearly and openly, for this is part of our obedience to God.