

B-06
 After Christmas #2
 January 4, 2009

FULL OF GRACE AND GLORY
 DO YOU WANT TO KNOW THE TRUTH?

Ephesians 1: 3-14
 John 1: 1-18

INTRODUCTION
 A BRIEF SUMMARY OF JOHN'S PROLOGUE

These first 18 verses of John serve as a prologue for the entire Gospel. In the introduction of a great symphony the composer usually introduces the musical themes that will be developed and played out throughout the four movements in the masterpiece. So, also John does the same with these first eighteen verses. He introduces the major themes that he covers in his gospel. Let me give you examples:

1. The Word of God who existed before creation,
2. The Word of God participated in all creation,
3. The Word of God is the life and light of humankind,
4. John the Baptist was sent to bear witness to the Light,
5. The Light came into the world, the world that was made through the Light,
6. The world did not know him,
7. His own people rejected him,
8. Yet those who believed in him became children of God (born of the spirit)
9. The Word became flesh. (The Preexistent Word of God, the Light of the World became a flesh and blood made human),
10. He was glorious
11. He was full of grace and truth.
12. Believers have received from him grace upon grace (lavishly gifted – his love and salvation)
13. Grace and Truth (not a truth) came through Jesus Christ.

Please note also, that all the major themes in the Gospel are in John's prologue, even the themes that have to do with Jesus' rejection, suffering and death. These are themes that are vital to our Christian faith and life, about which I want to say a few more things.

I

HAVE WE LOST TRUTH?

Did you know that there is a struggle for truth going on in our world and in our culture? Here's the problem: as our world becomes smaller and smaller we find ourselves living and working side by side with people who believe differently than we do. I am not talking about Presbyterians relating with Methodists. I am not talking about Presbyterian relating with Roman Catholics. All these different denominations are Christian: Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Lutheran, Episcopal, etc. All of these different Christian denominations believe in Jesus of Nazareth who is the Messiah and who was sent by God to redeem sinners. There may be differences, but all proclaim, at least officially, the great New Testament Creed, "Jesus is Lord." (Romans 10: 9)

No, these aren't the differences to which I am referring. I am referring to our neighbors who now happen to be Muslim, or Hindu, or Sikh, or Buddhist. They believe and have a religion that is not the Christian Faith.

The problem increases in complexity: how, as faithful Christians, are we supposed to relate to our neighbors who do not share our Christian faith? Until recently Christians related to non-Christians as if there were pagans – in the worst sense of the word. Non-Christians were perceived as targets for conversion. In a sense there is truth here. We do wish that all would come to the knowledge of the love of God as manifested in Jesus Christ.

Yet, I doubt if anyone here assumes that a non-Christian neighbor is a savage. Most often our new neighbors are kind, decent people who want to be good neighbors and good citizens. Too often, although not all the time, Christians relate condescendingly towards people of other faiths.

Too often, many Christians act superior to those of other faiths. After all, we Christians have the answer, don't we? Because of this unloving, non-Christian attitude toward those of other faiths, many other Christians have become increasingly embarrassed and disturbed about how to relate to Non Christians. And sometimes this embarrassment was appropriate.

This has created a crisis for many believers. The crisis goes something like this. In other words, the stereotype that all non-Christians are doomed to Hell and are going to act like that is no longer valid. There are many, the vast majority, of non Christians who are good, caring people who do not act like evil people who are doomed to Hell! If people of faiths other than the Christian faith are kind, caring, good people, then maybe Jesus isn't the only Messiah. Maybe, just maybe the

other religions are just as valid a path to redemption as the Christian religion. Maybe their way is just as valid as Jesus, or maybe Jesus is just A Messiah, and not THE Messiah.

So now, brothers and sisters we have people, including ministers, in our denomination, and in most of the other Christian denominations, who question the very foundation of our Christian Faith. They seriously wonder about Jesus and they consider him only as A Messiah for those who are Christian, but not the only Messiah for all humankind.

The absolute Truth about Jesus as THE Messiah is being challenged; even by people in our own denomination who are saying that Jesus is one of many valid ways to redemption.

THE Truth is being changed to just ANOTHER truth. Why? I believe that people are tempted by this because it attempts to explain how good people can have different beliefs than they have. The problem, though, is that it takes the heart out of the Christian Faith. It is like taking the poem of John and its wonderful truth and totally ignoring it.

II THE ANSWER FROM GOD (JESUS CHRIST)

So, finally, let me express what I believe is the way around the dilemma. And we get our resolution from the Scriptures. First of all, the Bible, especially expressed in our Gospel lesson, proclaims that Jesus is THE Messiah. He is the pre-existing Word of God who actively participated in the creation of the universe. WE believe what Jesus says in chapter 14 of John: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one come to the Father except through me."

Proclaiming that Jesus is THE Messiah does not, however, give us license to act haughtily and arrogantly toward those who belong to other faiths. When professing Christians act in that manner, they are sinning and acting contrary to the Commandments of our Lord. They are not behaving the way Christians should behave!

And what is that commandment? Jesus commands us to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. And he commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves. He does not make a distinction and say, "Just love those neighbors who believe the same way that you do." On the contrary Jesus commands us to love even our enemies and to pray for them! The Story of the Good Samaritan

says the same thing: love those who are different from you, who even worship differently than you.

We are indeed to live in a multicultural, pluralistic society. Does that mean giving up our Christian Faith? By no means! It means practicing our Christian faith even more diligently. It means learning to love and care for those whom we differ and even disagree! It means we pray that others will ask us about our faith and how it sustains us. I pray that the Lord give us the strength to do just that. Amen.

The Rev. Daniel E. Hale, D. Min.