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The National Presbyterian Church

Great Ends of the Church: Who Cares About the Truth?

Isaiah 59:1-4, 14-15; Romans 1:18-25

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In our sermons from January through the first Sunday in March we are thinking together about Christianity as a corporate enterprise. Not just Christianity as a one-on-one relationship between us and God though it should be that: God knows us as individual sheep! He knows us by name and he comes searching after us as if we were the only one in his flock. But he does have a flock! And when he finds us, he immediately calls us to become a part of the flock. This is Jesus' teaching. We find it throughout the pages of scripture. It is not merely a good idea that our Christian faith be lived out with others in the flock – as if we were free to say, “Oh, I think I'll go to church on top of my Christianity” – but to follow Jesus is immediately to be drawn into fellowship with other Christians. Indeed, we cannot do what Jesus wants us to do; we cannot be what Jesus wants us to be, unless we “be and do” together. Our calling is essentially corporate.

We are being called for example to be the body of Christ. I can't be the body of Christ by myself. You can't be the body of Christ by yourself. It's only when I am a fingernail attached to you as a finger, attached to somebody else as a hand or a wrist, and then attached to an arm attached to a body, attached to the head who is Jesus Christ, that we can be and do what Jesus Christ wants us to be and do.

So while Jesus knows us one by one, we have been called to live out our faith together. Christianity at its very essence is individual and corporate.

So we're thinking about the corporate nature of Christian faith and we're doing so with the help of a series of six Presbyterian statements in our Constitution and called **The Great Ends of the Church**. The Six Great Purposes of the Church:

1. The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind
2. The Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God
3. The Maintenance of Divine Worship
4. The Preservation of the Truth
5. The Promotion of Social Righteousness, and
6. The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World.

So far we've looked at three of these great purposes for the church that Jesus sets for us, that we cannot fulfill merely by ourselves.

The first is *the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind*. We've been entrusted with a gospel, a message of good news that we're to share with absolutely everyone (“humankind”) and it is for their well being, it is for their salvation. Salvation is the kind of help

you need when you cannot help yourself: I can't do this by myself; I need you; you need me; we need each other. The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of human kind.

The second is the *shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God*. We are children of God. Our father wants us to grow. Every parent wants a child to be nurtured and to grow. God is passionate that we grow, and we need an environment for growth; just as a university is an environment for growth so the church should be an environment for growth, for nurture, for spiritual fellowship, a place of safety to explore our faith. The shelter, nurture, spiritual fellowship of the children of God. We've been called to build such a church as this. If our church is like that, then wonderful! If it's not like that, then we have work to do! Well, we always have work to do, so that more and more this is how our church can be, not only for those who are here – I hope it is for you – but for others whom God is calling into the fellowship. So the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God, that's the second great end.

The third great end is *the maintenance of divine worship*. We're to make sure that the doors are open for worship in a society which worships less and less – at least publicly, or corporately. We are to maintain public divine worship. This has been part of the heritage of God's people from the very beginning. The building of the worship tent known as a "tabernacle" by the people of Israel (in Exodus), the building of the temple (in 1 Kings), the creation of the whole synagogue tradition within ancient Israel (in Nehemiah), moving on to the formation of the early church (in Acts) – all of these indicate that corporate worship is God's passion for us. Not just because we must, but because this is a privilege. Worship is to be like the response of one lover to another. God says to us "I love you," and when God says that we should say "We love you too!" And that's what worship is: "We love you too."

The church is not to be like the husband who said to his wife, "I told you on the day that I married you that I loved you and if I change my mind I'll let you know!" It doesn't work quite that way. That's why we have Valentine's Day so at least once a year we say "I love you." Well, once a week at least we're to come before God and say "I love you," as a response to the enormous grace shown to us by God.

This is our call to preserve divine worship, to maintain divine worship.

And we come this morning to the fourth of the Great Ends: ***The Preservation of the Truth***. I cannot do this by myself. You cannot. We are to do this together and even then this is a hard, it's a hard task to preserve the truth! To care about the truth in a world which really doesn't care too much about truth; to handle the truth with care, to stand up for truth in a world which is often highly skeptical of the very existence of any truth at all in the first place.

You go back to the time of our Lord Jesus Christ and the trial of our Lord Jesus Christ where Jesus stands before Pontius Pilot the Roman governor and they talk about who Jesus is. Are you the king of the Jews? Says Pontius Pilot to Jesus the conversation goes on and Pontius Pilot ends the conversation 2000 years ago by asking skeptically "What is truth?" (John 18:38) So, what is truth?

But this is our age, our age too. One person has said that the single word that describes the spirit of our age better than any other single word is the word “whatever”! The word “whatever” as in, “I think this, what do you think?” To which the response comes, “Whatever!” It’s not just the word by itself – it’s the attitude: a shrug of the shoulders; it doesn’t really matter; I really don’t care: “Whatever!”

Douglas Adams, the author of the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Universe*, adds a little more sophistication to the picture with these words about truth; about how relative and subjective the nature of truth is these days. He writes in *Mostly Harmless*,

“you cannot see what I see because you see what you see. You cannot know what I know because you know what you know. What I see and what I know cannot be added to what you see and what you know because they are not of the same kind. Neither can it replace what you see and what you know, because that would be to replace you yourself.”

In other words, everything you see or hear or experience in any way is all specific to you. You create a universe by perceiving it. Now that’s a very powerful statement. If you don’t perceive it, it doesn’t exist. So everything in the universe you perceive is specific to you.

Or in a more humorous vein, Walter Truett Anderson (*Reality Isn’t What It Used to Be*) describes the same issue in a conversation between three umpires in baseball discussing balls and strikes.

One umpire says “There are balls and there are strikes and I call them the way they are.” (*In other words there really is a strike zone and I get it right every single time.*)

The next umpire says “There are balls and there are strikes and I call them the way I see them.” (*In other words, I get it right most of the time but even if I get it wrong it doesn’t really matter, I’m calling the shots. But there really is the strike zone and I’m calling around the strike zone here.*)

The third umpire enters the picture and says “There are balls and there are strikes and they ain’t nothing until I call them.” (*In other words, I don’t care about the strike zone. It really doesn’t matter at all. The only thing that matters is what I call, the way I perceive it. By definition, I don’t make mistakes. My call is by definition the truth.*)

It’s all relative. It’s all a matter of personal perception. And if behind all these perceptions, these perspectives there really is truth to be found, there really is a strike zone, then

- in the first place in our day and age it’s really, really hard to find; and
- in the second place (and perhaps more powerfully and negatively) even if someone claims to find the truth we tend to believe that they will not handle it well: there is a high probability that those who claim to have the truth will not only use it but abuse it. Use it and abuse it.

Some of you may remember the movie *A Few Good Men* with Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson. It takes place at Guantanamo Bay, where there's been an incident that has been covered up – a disciplinary action that has gone wrong, covered up, and now it's all coming to court within the military legal system. In the movie, Tom Cruise is a young attorney, Lieutenant Kaffee, and Jack Nicholson is the wizened Colonel Jessup. And Colonel Jessup is on the witness stand. He's in the box being questioned by Lieutenant Kaffee. And at a critical moment in this trial Tom Cruise demands loudly, Kaffee demands loudly, "I want to know the truth!" To which Colonel Jessup replies (in true Jack Nicholson fashion!) "You can't handle the truth!" You can't handle the truth!

Of course the truth that appears in the movie is that Colonel Jessup is the one who can't handle the truth.

And the truth is that the truth is in fact hard to handle.

And the truth really is that those who claim to have a handle on the truth tend to handle it poorly.

And the truth is that truth is very closely related to power. As Lord Acton said "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power (like absolute truth?) may tend to corrupt absolutely. The German philosopher Frederiche Nietzsche once said (and at least it's partially true!), that any claim to know the truth is simply a concealed assertion of power, a way of maintaining control.

Well at times at least that seems to be true. But however true it is, the fact of the matter is that in our day and age, we tend to agree this much with Nietzsche, that any people who say they have the truth should be treated with a great deal of skepticism. Not just skepticism about the truth itself, but about those who claim to have a handle on truth, because of the way that truth has been abused. We see this in ideologies that claim to be true.

- The Communist ideology claims to be true. And we see the abuses that flow from it, and we become skeptical of the truth.
- And the Fascist ideology claims to be true. And we see the abuses that flow from it, and we become skeptical not only about Fascism, but about the possibility of truth.
- Or, at times even if you go to extreme Capitalism, we see the abuse that flows from extreme Capitalism and we become skeptical even of the "truth" of our own economic system.
- Or we look at religion, our own religion or others'. We see the horrors caused by those who are fanatical about God, about what they believe to be true. And then we see the abuses, the indiscretions, the unconscionable sexual abuse that is masked by this veneer of religious truth, and we become skeptical both of the existence of truth and of those who claim to wield it.

And yet despite those abuses, despite the abuses of those who believe that they've found or possess some measure of the truth, despite the fact, as Isaiah (59:14) says 2600 years ago: "Truth stumbles in the public square." (there's nothing new here: it always has. It always will.) Despite

the categorical assertions that there is no truth. (Though, if you think about it, how can you actually have a *categorical* assertion that there is no truth? Is the claim that there is no truth, not also a claim to possess truth?) And despite the post modern skeptical spirit of our age, the fact of the matter is this, ***that we human beings keep on believing that somewhere out there in the universe or in society or somewhere in here in our hearts or in our minds there is truth to be found.*** We can't escape this little inkling of an idea that *there is truth to be found*, truth worth pursuing, truth that we should care about, truth that we should seek if at all possible ("Get me to the truth. Just tell me the truth!") And even those who have fully bought into this skeptical age in which we live at times find themselves confounded and confused by this deep human hunger for what is truth.

Back in 2005 in the New York Times Magazine, Chicago University professor Mark Lilla wrote an article called *Getting Religion*. The article is actually about leaving religion, not getting it, but it's a very gracious, well-written article. It's about how Lilla had slipped away from committed Christianity and found himself in the world of secular academia. One day though, he says, he was challenged by the presence in his classroom of a bright student who had made a commitment to Christ at a Billy Graham crusade, and this is what he writes. He says,

"I wanted to warn him against the anti-intellectualism of American religion today and the political abuses to which it is subject. I wanted to cast doubt on the step he was about to take to help him see there are other ways to live, other ways to seek knowledge, love, perhaps even self transformation. I wanted to convince him that his dignity depended on maintaining a free skeptical attitude toward doctrine." [DR: And then he puts it on paper and says] "I wanted to . . . save him! I thought he was out of that business [DR: the business of "saving," "salvation"] but maybe not. It took years to acquire the education I missed as a young man, an education not only in books but in a certain comportment toward myself and the world around me. Doubt, like faith has to be learned, it is a skill. But the curious thing about skepticism is that its adherents ancient and modern have so often been proselytizers." [DR: That is, those who say there is no truth are desperate to find other people who believe that what they say is the truth! Do you get that? Do you hear this? They are desperate to find other people who agree with them that there is no truth!] "This is perplexing. Their skepticism offers no good answer to the question 'why do you care?' I've often wanted to ask why do you care. Their skepticism offers no good answer to that question and I don't have one for myself."

What I have to say this morning my friends is this: it's hard to say this and say it in a sense humbly, but to say this: that we as Christians claim that we do have the answer to that question. Why do we care about the truth as human beings? Why is there this passion to find the truth in every human being, to promote the truth even amongst those who are most vocally skeptical?

Well perhaps because of a reason that is so obvious that we don't see it?
Because the truth exists? Because there really is such a thing as truth? Because we

were made by a creator God to seek after and pursue truth as those made in the image of God?

Could it be that simple and that true? I of course believe that that is the truth. That the church has been entrusted with this truth and that we are to preserve it no matter what the prevailing atmosphere of the society around about us.

Not that we know the truth about everything everywhere! We're finite human beings. *Not that we hold the truth as a weapon that we are to wield over other people and to bludgeon them down saying I'm right and you're wrong.* We need what retired Ohio University Professor, Donald Borchert, a Presbyterian minister calls "epistemic humility" – humility about the limits of what we know. We need that. We're followers of a humble savior.

But, even if our knowledge of or our ability to grasp the truth is limited, nevertheless, our claim is that we have sufficient truth, enough truth, to fill us with awe and wonder (and humility) that we're here on Earth at all!

- The truth that we exist, and do so by the will of another who loves us, who loved you and me into existence.
- The truth that there is a creator God who is personal, not mere impersonal force, but personal "Father," who is passionate to be known, reveals himself in scripture and creation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and whose presence can be experienced by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- The truth that there is a triune God to whom by grace we belong in life and in death.

This, this at the very least is the truth that we've been called to care about and to preserve whether people in our age or any age believe it or not.

Some of them may say to us "prove it, prove it" to which I'd probably reply something like this, that there's plenty of evidence if you want to believe. If you don't want to believe then you probably won't find the evidence. If you do, there's evidence out there to be found.

As someone trained in mathematics my favorite piece of evidence which convinced me in days gone by, and convinces me even more these days, that there is some kind of ultimate truth "out there", is that the whole of the universe can be explained in terms of ones and zeros. How bizarre is that? How strange is that that we are able to analyze everything that we see, and digitize it, turn it into ones and zeros? Surely God has the biggest sense of humor of all behind all this complexity that it all boils down to ones and zeros. How stunning is that? It stuns me to this very day.

Or on a completely different level: we hear all the things that the church does wrong and we don't want to hide from this awful truth: there is no doubt but that the "truth has stumbled" not only in the public square, but in the church! No doubt about it at all. But on the other hand there is no other institution in the history of humankind that has done more for art or music or education or medicine or science or for the very existence of the liberal society on which we depend which allows us to believe and doubt without fear – than the church! There is no other

institution, for all its flaws, that has done as much for the society in which we depend as the church. I can point to saints known and saints unknown who have given their lives away for others. And while I'm obviously not a Catholic, there are times in which I want to scream and defend the Catholic Church, despite the abuses and say "*Don't you know about Catholic Charities? Nine million, nine million people in our nation are helped by them every year and with countless hospitals on top? Who else does this? Do the atheists do this?*" We Christians have our flaws. But the evidence points in a certain direction. It may not be proof, but it points, I think, to the truth.

But in the end, in the end it really doesn't worry me if people are not convinced by the evidence that is there; because in the end I believe with the apostle Paul in Romans Chapter 1, that *the kind of truth we're speaking about with respect to God is not necessarily the kind of truth that you can or need to prove*. Indeed, I agree both with Paul and the late great Bishop Leslie Newbiggin (*Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*) that the truth about God is more like a scientific axiom than like a scientific proof.

Some people forget that at the foundation of all of science and math there are axioms which we take for granted that we cannot prove, that in some sense are self evident. Indeed our nation's independence is based on this, is it not? In the Declaration of Independence do we say "We take these truths to be proven?" No! Rather, we take these truths to be foundational, "self evident," undergirding everything else, and it's the *fruit of the axiom* which is the only proof we have that the axiom itself is true: – does it lead to goodness or evil? Blessing or curse? Will it set us free?

For me the truth of God is an axiom, an assumption. This glorious truth of the triune God. To be sure, I think there's good evidence for this assumption. But even if I cannot provide "proof," the lack of proof doesn't disprove *that* God is, and *who* God is! Rather, *that* God is and *who* God is, is the axiom on which everything else rests. To follow the Psalmist (34:8) we need to experiment with this axiom, we need to "taste and see that God is good!" In other words: check it out, make this your axiom, that there is a God, a creator God, a triune God who is personal and passionate to know us and to be known by us; revealed in creation and revealed in scripture; revealed in Jesus of Nazareth and to be experienced here and now by his Holy Spirit. Taste and see – and the truth of it will be seen in experience that follows!

The preservation, the pursuit of, the caring for, the truth.

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