

Season after Pentecost - First John (Week 4)

August 3/4, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: John 14: 15-17; I John 4: 1-6

“Don’t Believe Everything You Hear”

Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.

On the Tuesday Herald-Mail’s Opinion page, a letter to the editor began, “What is truth?” and ended, “Whose ‘truths’ are you trusting for your future?”¹ This week we have heard a great deal from the intelligence and Homeland security agencies about, the ability of clever computer saboteurs to post false messages that look like reliable sources, in order to incite anger, fear, and division between Americans and influence election outcomes. Most of us have read stories about someone who was caught in an internet scam, providing private information or money because the message “seemed” so real and they didn’t check it out. The availability of news and information has greatly increased in its amount and speed, but its reliability has become more muddy and suspect. Learning how to fact-check internet and news stories has become an essential skill if you want to be armed with the truth before forming opinions or passing on information.

Whom do you believe? How do you sift the true from the false? The magnitude of the challenge in our day is critical and dangerous but it’s not new. Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” St. Paul and the author of First John wrote to early Christian communities already dealing with “fake news” about Jesus that threatened to divide them and to raise doubts among the faithful. It’s still happening today with preachers, politicians and internet postings offering a version of the

gospel that brings them great popularity while spreading an interpretation of Scripture that is questionable at best.

From the beginning, Jesus instructed his followers to be discerning listeners, readers, students in matters of faith. Jesus warned us about “false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing” (Matt 7:15). He warned us “many will come in my name, saying ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.”(Matt. 24:5) Like Jesus, the writer of First John is worried about false teachers and teachings who would confuse or lead astray believers. He says they are of the spirit of the antichrist. This is the only place in the Bible where that word appears. While the “antichrist” takes on its own persona in later literature, here in the first letter of John “antichrist” takes its meaning from “the Greek prefix, ‘anti’ that means both “against” and “substitute” --- so, “against” Christ or a “substitute” for Christ. In the First Letter of John, the author is raising the alarm about teachings that are literally “against” and “substitutes” for the truth of the incarnate Jesus — God’s Word made flesh — and the resurrected Christ.

What might the Elder, author of First John, call “antichrist” today? Like evil itself that which is “anti-Christ” can take on many different forms with the same result of luring folks away from the true gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. Consider all and everything that can be set “against” or as a “substitute” for God today --- Materialism, intolerant self-righteousness, moral relativism, extreme individualism, nationalism or isolationism. When that battle of saint and sinner within each of us leads to twisting God’s truth to suit our desires and wishes, might that, too, be a

spirit of antichrist? Like those original disciples, we are surrounded by voices and opportunities that would lead us away from a true understanding of Jesus and discipleship. With what tools do we sift through what is true to God from what is false or in opposition to God? The Elder, author of First John, advises us to discern by “testing the spirits to see if they are from God.”

When I was trying to decide if I was really meant to go to seminary I asked a pastor for advice. He said, “Test the spirit.” I didn’t know if he was serious or not. It sounded a bit like I was supposed to use a Ouija board or cast lots to get an answer, which just didn’t sound right. What he meant was that I should pray to God for clarity, read Scripture and ask other believers to do the same with me. I was scared to death of the prodding I felt toward the ministry of word and sacrament. Was it a calling from God or my imagination? Was the Holy Spirit at work or an unholy spirit at play? I once heard of a church that framed each council and congregational vote to be a kind of “testing of the spirit.” When they are about to make a decision by vote, the convener asks, “All who believe this is what God is calling us to do say ‘Aye.’” “All those who do not believe God is calling us to do this say, ‘Nay’.” They are asked to discern not by personal preference but by what they sense is God’s will as revealed in Scripture and Christ.

When we “test the spirit” to see if a statement, doctrine or proposed action is of God, we lay whatever it is next to Jesus and the Scriptures. That is where God’s truths, values, purposes and commands are most clearly revealed. That is why Bible study and Christian education are not just for children. Followers of Jesus

need to continue to grow in their familiarity and understanding of Holy Scripture and Jesus throughout our lives. Being able to quote the bible or know the order of the books is wonderful but that's not what I'm talking about. It's practicing, spending time to read, ponder, search, and wonder in God's Word that is of great importance. I'm *not* saying all of us are to become Bible scholars. What I *am* saying is that our Bibles are meant for more than decor. The Word of God – which is both the Bible and Jesus — is intended to become a part of us, a major resources we draw upon, consciously or unconsciously, when we make the umpteen decisions we need to make each day. The Word of God — both the Bible and Jesus — is the lamp unto our feet and the light onto our path. For that reason, we dedicate a large part of worship each week to listen and learn from it ---- letting God's Word in Scripture and Jesus feed, teach and linger within us so they can be that lamp and light we need to keep us on God's pathways and follow faithful leadership.

If you worry about your abilities to read and understand the Bible or Jesus, let me assure you that we were never asked to do it on our own. Knowing he would not always be there as their teacher, Jesus promised, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive . . . You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." In Baptism we received the gift of the Holy Spirit — the Advocate, the active presence of God at work in us. *"The Advocate is God representing God to us, revealing God to us in ways that we could not have come up with on our own . . .* How immensely reassuring that Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would

teach and remind us of all that he said. None of us is born Christian. We must learn the faith . . . Jesus tells us some astounding truth that is easy to forget [or ignore]. Therefore the [Holy Spirit] reminds us.”²

Will Willimon tells of “a person who suffered a great wrong at the hands of another. She was justifiably angry at the injustice perpetrated against her. In an encounter with her wrongdoer, her rage boiled over and she was in the process of, ‘Giving him a piece of my mind.’ [In the midst of her rage] she ‘remembered that Christ commanded us to forgive our enemies.’ She [consciously thought], ‘Lord, I’ll try to do what you want me to do, but you’ll have to help me’. Her remembrance was the work of the Advocate, the true eternal truth-teller, the Teacher, the Living Reminder otherwise known as the Holy Spirit.”³

When it comes to faith and the gospel message, [There] is [divine] truth we cannot teach ourselves, truth that is a great mystery . . . The Advocate is a truth-teller.⁴ The Elder, author of First John, urged us to let the Holy Spirit help us discern between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. Part of testing the spirits is letting the Holy Spirit enlighten, reveal and point to the truth that is of God. Part of “testing the spirits” is actively seeking the Holy Spirit’s counsel in prayer, Scripture and Christian community.

Willimon recalled “a little church in Alabama that had been saving for a decade to build its own church and move out of the rented space where it worshiped. A couple in the church had raised four foster children. One Sunday, during the prayers of intercession, the couple said that social services had asked

them to take on three more children who had become homeless. They asked the church for prayers, 'to help us find a larger place to rent so we can take in these kids.' They prayed. With that, one of the oldest members of the congregation blurted out, 'We don't need to pray for that. Let's give them our building fund money!' There was applause. That Sunday the church gave the entire building fund to enable the family to have a larger home. [That church's discernment and decision is what happens] when "ordinary people pray, "Come! Holy Spirit!"⁵ AND listen.

"What is truth?" The First Letter of John may not be able to help us sift through what is reliable and unreliable on Facebook, Twitter, internet ads and news reporting. But the Elder, author of First John" wisely instructs us to be discerning believers and mindful that not everything we hear is truth according to God's standards. Even the label "Christian" does not always mean it is of God. We are to examine what we hear to see if it stands true to the Holy Scriptures and the teachings of Jesus. We are to examine what we say and do to see if it is true to Holy Scripture and Jesus. We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit within us and within our church to equip us to "test the spirits" for what is truth or error according to the will and Word of God. It is essential we do so if we are to stay on God's path. There are so many forces that are against or a substitute for God' truth revealed most perfectly in Jesus. It's not always easy to discern gospel truth and the Holy Spirit's guidance, but it is so important we do so, for the sake of our faithfulness and God's healing of the world. Amen. Linda M Alessandri 8/3/18

ENDNOTES

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1. Donna Staggers, "Putting Trust in Truth" a Letter to the Editor, The Herald Mail, July 31, 2018
 2. Adapted from " The Holy Spirit, by Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, Part 3" October 22, 2015 as posted on www.day1.org
 3. Ibid
 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid