

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for January 29, 2012  
Lessons: Deuteronomy 18:15-22 and Mark 1:21-28

## CALLED TO DISCERN

How can we know what is the truth of God and what is not? That question troubled God's people even back in ancient times. The great prophets of Israel and Judah spoke God's word to the people in their present circumstances to tell them what they needed to hear then and there for the sake of their covenant relationship with God and their dealings with each other. The great prophets were not teachers of doctrine. They did not call the people to take time out from their lives to study eternal truths; rather, they brought God's truth to bear upon the everyday. They called for justice to be done, wrongs to be set right, and faithfulness to be renewed. The great prophets were drawn into the passionate love of God for the people so they felt and therefore spoke something of God's anger at injustices, of God's grief over the sins and sufferings of the nation, and of God's longing for honesty in the people's worship and compassion in their treatment of the vulnerable.

Here's the problem that arose even way back then. False prophets began delivering conflicting messages they all said were "from God." Anyone who wanted a following or a payoff from those in power could claim to be a prophet and start spouting whatever messages the public wanted to hear or the powerful would pay to have the public hear. Political and economic propaganda is nothing new, nor is giving it a religious spin. The very powerful have always considered religion useful for keeping the people content with their lot in life, however miserable it may be. God, however, has always seen things much differently.

Our reading from Deuteronomy warns against false prophets but also promises God's ongoing and active concern for the people, their lives, and their shared life in community and society. It is that positive part of the message – the promise of God's present care and guidance – that concerns me most this morning as in our Annual Meeting we wrap up 2011 and reset ourselves to go forward as a church into 2012 with purpose, direction, commitment, and hope. We have a vision for our future, but it is not in our vision that we put our trust. What we think we need to do as a church can change, and it will be changed as we keep learning and growing. That's why it's a vision, not just a plan.

So, let me ask the question. How can we discern the truth of God in a world of competing truths and toxic falsehoods? We human beings tend to hear either of two messages about ourselves and our lives. We hear either *what we want* or *what we fear*. We

should be suspicious of either. If Jesus' life and teaching seem to fit perfectly with my own beliefs, desires, and ambitions, then something is wrong. I'm not truly listening. He did not come to validate my opinions, grant my wishes, and bless my undertakings. God is not the genii in the lamp, the perpetual Santa Claus, or our great business partner in the sky. On the other hand, neither did Jesus come to judge and condemn us. His message is good news about God's will for us because God's truth is not judgment but redemptive love.

The very nature of God's truth is love, and the purpose of God's truth is redemption, which means the restoration of the lost to God's family. The nature of God's truth is the hardest thing for people to grasp and hold. The conservative in us thinks judgment must be the decisive factor in truth. That's why the conservative in us thinks testing is very heart and soul of education, because it thinks the same of life -- that life is all about, not just passing the test, but excelling, standing out as the finest, winning the competition, getting ahead of the pack. No, it's not, not at all, but we have a very hard time shaking that notion that testing is education because we think testing is life. For many Christians, Jesus Christ is all about final judgment, the ultimate test -- heaven or hell, salvation or damnation. No, he's not. What he came to give us is not just another chance to do better before the axe falls on our necks but a completely different way of changing us, our lives, and the human community. God's truth is not revealed by judgment; it is revealed by healing, forgiving, restoring, and redirecting us from death toward life. He came to bring us home and take us back into the family. It's not a test; it's an adoption.

But the liberal in us may think tolerance is the decisive factor in God's truth. Well, that notion may sound more pleasant (less harsh), but tolerance offers us neither respect nor hope. Tolerance just lets things be because it does not care enough to want things changed. No, Jesus did not come to tell us everything about us and about human society was okay with God. He came to have it out with us for God but for our sake. He took God's side and our side, and he refused to give up either, which is why he got crucified. Tolerance is not good enough because it lacks love. It has no passion for justice or for healing, either, but merely lets well enough alone. Tolerance neither attacks nor embraces; it just tolerates.

I believe Jesus Christ calls us to discern God's truth, not just when we listen to preaching, but as we live our lives out there in our Monday through Saturday worlds. God's truth is redemptive love. To so discern God's truth in life, we need to want that redemptive love for ourselves and want it for each other and for this world. The wanting is important. It is not enough to comprehend God's truth, we need to want it. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for it, for they shall be satisfied. Jesus did not come looking for people who deserved God's kingdom, for then he would have looked in vain. He came looking for people he could move to want it, to desire the healing, wholeness, and newness of life God would give them. But with healing comes God's demand for compassion, with forgiveness

comes God's demand that we forgive those who hurt us, and with wholeness comes God's demand for justice and peace, and so not everyone wants what Jesus came to offer. Those who desire only prosperity for themselves, power for their own nation, and the destruction of their enemies are not interested in what Jesus offers them. Those who fancy themselves superior to others find him annoying. Those who would preserve the power and privilege they enjoy in the present structures of this world are not in the market for what Jesus called God's kingdom.

What's going on in our reading from Mark's gospel? The people are astonished by the authority with which Jesus teaches and heals, but what does that mean? The scribes who also taught the people claimed great authority – God's own authority to tell the people what to do and how to do it and, of course, what not to do. Jesus is teaching something different. He is representing God's love and mercy to them in ways that can change their lives, not just keep them in line. He cares what happens to them in life, and he tells them that God cares, too. Then he shows them God cares, but his healing the mentally disturbed man who disrupts his teaching is not done for show. Jesus silences the talk about who he is, restoring the focus to what God wants for the people. He has not come to proclaim himself and assume power over the people but to heal them, restore them to God, and give himself for them. The listeners are astonished because Jesus does more than talk at them, adding to their burdens in life. He gives them hope that God really does care and will be there for them.

So, how do we discern God's truth in our world and in our lives? We can start by recognizing the nature of God's truth as Jesus reveals it to us – not testing and blaming but not mere tolerance, either. God's truth is present and at work in redemptive love. So, the more we learn to see ourselves and each other in terms of our worth to God, the more clearly we will be able to discern what really is God's will. Jesus' answer to sickness, insanity, and human suffering was to heal the distressed and, as is the case with this disruptive man in our lesson, the distressing. We can't always do that, but we can want it. How many times I have wished I could do what Jesus did for people in distress, but I could not. Think about that with me. How much would our lives be changed and the life of our communities be changed if we really wanted redemptive love to be at work in the world? If we truly wanted people to get, not what we think they deserve, but what God wants for them? We would then see everything with new eyes and hear with new ears. Wanting that genuine truth of God for each other as well as for ourselves would make so great a difference that life would never be the same again. Amen.