

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for August 21, 2011 in the Old Broad Street Church
Lessons: Exodus 1:8-21 and Matthew 16:13-20

BEYOND GETTING IT RIGHT

Sometimes getting it right and keeping it that way can lead to having it wrong. That's what we call a paradox. Let me illustrate.

Young children have great imaginations, but they reach a time when imagination retreats before the onslaught of facts, and for a while facts become their simple truth. School may encourage this nailing down of knowledge because it is easier to test than is creativity or the dynamic and expansive thought of questioning. But facts alone can make for paltry truth, closing our minds to the many complexities and changing situations of life. Plus, some facts are really no more than standardized prejudices. "Columbus discovered America in 1492." Really? Well, this land was not called America in 1492, Christopher Columbus had little idea where he had landed or what he had found, but more importantly there were already people living here many of whom Columbus and his followers killed or enslaved. Besides, he didn't really even get to the mainland with his discoveries and conquests. So, the "fact" we have taught our children for generations is really a prejudice toward the supremacy of Europeans and the insignificance of other peoples.

"The earth revolves around the sun" is a fact that replaced an earlier fact that earth was the center of the cosmos around which the sun revolved or, even earlier, over which the sun traveled. Now, however, we are told that neither fact is quite true because all the parts are moving in our expanding universe, and there is no fixed point.

There are, however, even more significant ways in which getting it right can lead to having it wrong. Think of relationships, of love, trust, and mutual respect. In any relationship, it is quite possible to be too right too often.

The Christian system of thought and belief suffers from getting it too right and inflicting its rightness upon its own believers and upon other people it wishes to influence. The time for Christian correctness has passed. In fact (!), there never really was such a time because the truth of Jesus Christ is redemptive love that is willing to suffer and even lay down its life for the sake of the unworthy and unresponsive. So, the only kind of authority Christianity may faithfully claim and exercise can never be authoritarian. Jesus has not empowered us to run the show, dictate people's beliefs and behaviors, or dominate the

society. Those who seek dominion in the name of Christ thereby falsify his name because Christian truth without humility and self-denying love is falsehood and tyranny.

As followers of Jesus and sharers in his community of faith, we need to realize that getting it right in his way of truth requires that we never think we have it just right. He says that when we have done all we can in serving him by serving others, we are to tell ourselves we are unworthy servants who have done no more than our duty. We are never to become benefactors, which in the Greco-Roman world meant rich, successful, and powerful people who enhanced their own public images by their charity and philanthropy. Grace is not largesse but humble service that seeks no payback and struts no pride.

It is the humble midwife who has no power or authority but fears God too much to kill the baby boys even on the king's orders who truly gets it right within her immediate situation, at risk to her own life. The midwives in the Exodus story leading up to the birth of Moses know there are worse things than death. These midwives tell a lie because, were they to tell the factual truth, not only might they be put to death but the king's officials would send others to kill the baby boys. So the greater truth of love and justice requires the lie.

Be careful. Here indeed we must be very, very careful because we live in a world in which deceit has become an art form. "Tell the lie often enough and it becomes the truth." "Tell the big lie, and people will believe you." Dispute the facts that question your program, and you can make your own facts to suit your purpose. So, these days we suffer the embarrassment as well of the danger of having Christianity and our biblical faith misused to oppose and scorn scientific investigation. That's ideology at its worst, where the beliefs dictate what the facts must be and where the beliefs themselves are corruptions of the faith for the purposes of power. So, yes, these days we need fact-checkers constantly, but we need also a better, more redemptive context for truth that urges us to want more (not less) than just facts.

Now, why have I asked you to think with me about the dangers and pretensions of getting it right to introduce the question Jesus puts to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"? Every sermon I have ever heard preached from this passage in Matthew has understood that the question Simon Peter answers in our lesson is now asked of us. It is indeed to you, me, and us together that Jesus puts his question, "But who you say that I am?" We cannot answer that question once-and-done, because he will keep asking in every changing situation of our lives.

Christian rightness may be doctrinal, evangelical, pietistic, or social. It can be conservative or liberal, reactionary or progressive. When I think I have Jesus just right is when I stand in greatest danger of getting him all wrong. Why? It's not a puzzle or riddle

to be solved but a way of life to be walked humbly with God, and if I think I have it just right, then I don't need faith and I'm quite unlikely to keep humility. Rather, I am sorely tempted to inflict my rightness upon other people. Years ago, a young woman who had been raised in an authoritarian Christian household shared with me a saying she had found very helpful: "Truth without love is judgment." I would go even further by making it, "Truth without love is tyranny." Paul the apostle would tell the proud and contentious Corinthians that truth, knowledge, prophecy, belief, or even self-giving service to the point of martyrdom, without love, amount to falsehood and nothingness. Yes, Paul included faith and ministry: "If I have all faith so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

We live in a time when Christianity is grossly misrepresented by attempts to re-establish it as the dominant religion and prevailing authority in American life and society. That's a false goal. Jesus has sent us to serve, not to rule. So, we must reject attempts to misuse his name to gain power and prominence. America is not Christendom, thanks be to God. Christendom did enough harm in Europe; we don't need a new version of it here, where its proponents link the name of Jesus to racism, sexism, homophobia, and all manner of heartless authoritarianism, identity politics, and the encouragement of hatred for selected groups of people. Jesus does not hate men or women. He does not hate Muslims, liberals, or conservatives. He does not hate people for their identities. His name should not be used to push gay teenagers toward suicide or women trapped in brutal marriages toward despair.

So, who do we say Jesus is? For today, I can say, in part and only in part (because the question is much too big and too personal ever to be settled and done): *Jesus, you are the one who brings me hope, who challenges my pride and shame (whichever needs challenging at the moment), who represents and embodies God for me as God really is, who makes my love for the people closest to me matter but also insists that I expand love and justice to include people well beyond the circle of "me and mine," who gives me life and teaches me to live it more honestly and faithfully (despite my failures and rebellions), who convinces me there are far worse things than growing older and even than dying but then calls me to relax about it and trust and laugh and live, who reminds me that life is not all about me and that God has wonderful things in mind for all people and for this world, who makes me care again about seemingly hopeless causes that question the right of power, and who is both our future in God's love and our present God-with-us this very day and tomorrow.* I could go on and on, and that's the point. I need to keep going on with that question: Who do I say (with my words and my life) he is? Who do we together as a church say by our words, our silences, and our choices Jesus is? Amen.