

**August 30, 2020**

*John 18: 33-19:1*

*I John 4: 1, 7-21*

***Nevertheless***

**The Reverend Dr. Richard E. Spalding**

This month our summer sermons have been focused on how finding, and living, the “new beginnings” we so crave depends on perseverance. That’s the quality of spiritual stubbornness that we might associate with the phrase “eyes on the prize” – and if there was ever a time in our lives to be keeping our “eyes on the prize,” this might be that time. As Mark Mares said last Sunday,<sup>1</sup> this is a time to reaffirm our calling as people of faith: to keep our eyes on our bedrock understanding that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God’s own self, not counting our trespasses against us but entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation.” If we persevere, maybe we’ll find our way back to a place where we don’t fear each other anymore; if we all keep our eyes on the prize, maybe we won’t have to argue any more about whether any lives matter because we’ll have set up a society in which that finally doesn’t need to be questioned any more. “Eyes on the prize” – in the words of that old resistance song; maybe that’s the kind of “new song” that the psalm that called us to worship this morning is urging us to sing: *Hold on! Hold on! Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!*

But what shall we persevere in holding on to??

Admittedly the story of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate, on the last day of his life, makes a rather somber focal point for a summer Sunday in the midst of a theme about “new beginnings.” But then, many things about the mood of this summer are being chosen for us these days, aren’t they? – by anger in the streets, infection in the air, storms in the gulf, uncertainty about the future, separation from each other. In the midst of all that, what is there to hold on to on the way to a new beginning? That’s the question that I hear at stake in the exchange between Jesus and Pilate.

We should start by being fair to Pilate: when he asks Jesus, “What is truth?” maybe he’s looking for a prize to fix his eyes on. The question, “What is truth?” might be at home in any of our own spiritual journeys, our struggles of conscience, even our arguments about public policy. It comes at the end of a completely unsatisfying exchange between them in which Pilate is trying to get Jesus to answer the charges that have been levied against

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Mark Mares, “Walking in Balance,” August 23, 2020.

him, that he's a would-be king, a blasphemer or an insurrectionist. But Jesus isn't taking that bait. "I came into the world to tell the truth," he says; "everyone who cares about truth is paying attention." It's hard to read what's behind Pilate's question: is he intrigued? Cynical? Scornful? Maybe it's even a poignant moment – but still he misses an opportunity to give Jesus the benefit of the doubt, and a few minutes later he earns the reputation he's ended up with when he ostentatiously washes his hands of the innocent blood he declines to protect, and ends up demonstrating how challenges to truth can be sharpened to a lethal edge.

Here in a community in which the dominant industry is education, the question "What is truth?" strikes a particular chord. When I was a college chaplain, I'd often find myself sitting with a student who came in just to talk, not quite knowing why – and suddenly we'd find ourselves on the sharp edge of that same question: "What is truth?" The question matters; and for many of the students I met, and maybe for some of you too, the plea that you can almost hear lurking within it is something like – *give me something to hold on to. Persuade me to believe. Point me toward the path that leads to a more reliable and responsible kind of comfort, a more timeless and trustworthy set of values, a more vivid sense of the whole of which I am only a part. Help me to see the kind of hope that others seem to see. Show me a prize to keep my eyes on.*

As Jesus said to Pilate, so Jesus says to us: "I came into the world to tell the truth; everyone who cares about truth is paying attention." Wanting to pay that kind of attention – wanting to find that kind of truth to set us free – in those conversations with students, I would almost always turn to the first letter of John. That's our second lesson this morning; let's listen again for the word of God:

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*

*...Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.*

*God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.*

*No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*

*Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.*

*We love because God first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

“God is love,” is one of the most essential teachings of Christianity – I would venture to say, one of the greatest contributions of our tradition to human civilization. We have from Judaism the magnificent instruction to “love the Lord Your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength” (Deuteronomy 6) and the surpassing image of God as one who cares as tenderly and vigilantly for us as a shepherd for a flock (Psalm 23). But to it we Christians add this sublime notion that the loves with which we love each other are *of God* – that to love one another is to participate in the work of God, the play of God, the very identity and nature of God: “love is from God,” says John in his letter; “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” And even, “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” God is love – which is to say: that power that is at work in you, as you rise to the fullest stature of yourself to care for someone – or to care about something – with all the strength and soul and mind you can put to it – that is *of God*. That sense of meaning and purpose that steals over you when you think about committing your heart to something good that really matters – the kind of “vocation” that Mark Mares was talking about last Sunday – that is *of God*. Jesus said, “I came into the world to tell the truth; everyone who cares about truth is paying attention.” So, if you are looking for something to hold on to, pay attention to how love is moving around in your life. Pay attention to the places where love is missing from your life, or the places where your love has added something that was missing from someone else’s life. Pay attention to the places where you are better than you thought you were, or could be better than you are. “By this we know that we abide in God and God in us,” says John.

And, John says, pay attention, too, to the places where truth is in trouble. “Beloved, do not believe every spirit,” he warns, “but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” He knows that there are falsehoods in circulation. Distortions of the truth that exalt the love of power above the love of God, the love of self above the love of others, the love of things above the love of being – distortions like the one Pilate perpetrated when he tried to force Jesus’s self-sacrificing love into the categories of earthly power. Like any of the truest and best things about us – like any great gift we receive or give – love can be distorted, misused, corrupted. That’s what makes the search for truth so complicated and so important: we know that not everything that introduces itself as love actually *is* love, and we will always have to test the spirits – for there are (in case you haven’t noticed) false prophets who are telling lies that have everything to do with power and nothing to do with love. But the fact that, as very *human* human beings, we love imperfectly does not diminish the godliness of the truest love that is at work within and among us – and does not diminish the urgency of our need to discern it and hold on to it.

The 19th-century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard spent his life trying to tell the truths that mattered a great deal to him as best he could discern them and describe them. It was strenuous work that took a toll on him

– and on a particular day in 1850, with his soul-searching near its apex, he wrote these remarkable words in his journal:

This is all I have known for certain, that God is love. Even if I have been mistaken on this or that point: God is nevertheless love, that I believe, and whoever believes that is not mistaken. If I have made a mistake it will be plain enough; so I repent – and God *is* love. ...[God] *is* love, not [God] *was* love, nor: [God] *will* be love, oh no, even that future was too slow for me, [God] *is* love. Oh, how wonderful.<sup>2</sup>

So. There are times when we take our stands and stake our claims for things that turn out not to matter very much – things that don’t help, or even that hurt this poor already-broken world. Nevertheless, God is love. There are ways in which churches must be among the most vexing and dysfunctional institutions we human beings have created; ways in which “organized religion,” regardless of its creed, seeks to preserve its own power, guard its own interests, and ignore or forget its own principles. God is, nevertheless, love. There are times when we human beings – as individuals and even, more chillingly, as communities and as whole societies – go about our business for weeks or decades or generations at a time without stopping to notice for one minute that we passed a higher road we could have taken, missed an opportunity to protect innocent blood that will otherwise be shed, or to stop suffering that could otherwise have been avoided. But, like the silent star that shines, invisibly and unnoticed, even in the daytime sky overhead – God is, nevertheless, love. God stands, as love, through the raging storms of our disagreements, the chilling silence of our apathy, the ache of our uncertainty, the sting of our disillusionment.

There have been times in my life, as perhaps in yours, when the question “What is truth?” would have sounded like part of a rather arcane philosophical argument. In my comfortable life, there were times when perseverance might have seemed like the kind of showcase virtue to put on a resume – instead of like the most rigorous spiritual discipline, a survival skill. But I think we have been learning, lately, about the lives of our sisters and brothers for whom perseverance is a literal matter of life and death. And I think we are learning, now, that our life together may be a matter of perseverance in holding on, with that quality of spiritual stubbornness, and insisting on the truth that will set us all free. *Hold on! Hold on!* Sings the old/new song; *Keep your hand on the gospel plow – hold on!* You or I may have been mistaken about this or that, may have missed opportunities to rise to our fullest stature or to think more carefully about what will add to the amount of love or justice or compassion in this world. God is, nevertheless, love. We may have slash like swords and pierce like spears. God is, nevertheless, love. That is the truth Jesus came to tell to those who are paying attention – and that truth is the hammer that will beat the swords and spears of the liars into the plowshares that we will need to furrow the soil of a parched world for the planting of the only thing that can save us, which is love. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth – and the truth shall set you free.” So, as the old/new song says, *keep your hand on the gospel plow –hold on!*

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<sup>2</sup> The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard - edited and translated by Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 394, entry #1102 (1850).