

Whose Truth Are You Living?

Eastertide V

Scripture: Philippians 3:4-11; 4:10-14; Matthew 28:1-10

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
April 28, 2002

Transcription of the spoken sermon

On Easter I gave you the analogy of the caterpillar and the butterfly, the butterfly, of course, the prime symbol for Easter and for resurrection. I mentioned that the caterpillar takes from the egg certain cells and those cells have within them the blueprint for the legs and the wings of the butterfly, and at a certain point in the development of the caterpillar, those cells begin to create disks within the creature which are perceived by the immune system of that creature as being alien and foreign and therefore are attacked, but eventually they overcome. The zoologist calls those cells imaginal cells, a wonderful name, imaginal cells. They imagine within themselves what that caterpillar can become, and when they finally overcome the resistance of the immune system, the caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly that, in all of its beauty, flies away in freedom. That analogy, of course, is received on Easter Sunday as an analogy of that transformation that occurs at the point of our death. Certainly it is a beautiful analogy for that possibility, that transformation about which I remain agnostic, because who knows what kind of transformation that might be?

This morning I want to point out what I really intended to point out but probably didn't have the time or didn't have the presence of mind to do, and that is that as the Easter message title was "Just Imagine the Real Miracle of Easter," I want to point out that that analogy is *apropos*, as well, for the possibility in our present existence to come to new insight, to come to transforming understanding, to come to a new way of being, to be given the gift of eyes to see and ears to hear, and to see the same things we've always seen, only to see them in a new way such that it is transformative of our life and of our being. So, I raise the question this morning in order to get at that - "Whose Truth Are You Living?"

An intentional question - whose truth are you living? Not "Whose Truth Do You Believe?" but whose truth are you living? In other words, what is the vision that has informed your life? What is at the center of your passion, what creates the life map, the sense of orientation for your ordinary days and for those crisis periods that come now and again? What is that at the center, the core of your being? Whose truth are you living?

That question is a question intended to illicit an answer from you which, if I were so lucky, would be "my truth." Whose truth are you living? Tell me you're living your truth. Perhaps that seems a bit presumptuous. Maybe that even feels arrogant to you. Live my truth? My truth? Who am I, after all? My truth? I'm a part of a long tradition.

Perhaps in answer to my question, rather than saying, "My truth," you might say, "I'm Christian," or "I'm Muslim." Or you might get more particular, you might say, "As a Christian, I'm Protestant." If you're really picky, you might say, "I'm a Lutheran or a Methodist or a Presbyterian." In other words, we define ourselves often in terms of a group with which we are affiliated. We gain our identity through that group-think which has formed and shaped us, the community of which we are a part, and if you would say to me this morning some answer like that, not "My truth," but "The Christian tradition," then I think you would be in good company, most likely with the vast majority of folk who would so define themselves in terms of some such community affiliation. I must say that is not all bad because if you would have answered me, "I live by my truth," you would only have come to your truth through one of the great traditions.

Our truth does not emerge in a vacuum. We are shaped and formed, and that is why, in a community like this, we nurture our children and we shape our youth. We have a responsibility to pass on a tradition which has been a positive tradition, a positive power and shaping force in our lives. It has given us order. It has given us some sense of the meaning of life, of the direction of life. It has spoken to us of God and of humankind and of history and culture, and it has helped us to find our way in the passages of life. So, don't hear me denigrate the tradition and the respective traditions, and even the narrowing down of those traditions into creedal forms and confessional groups, for all of us, finally, will have to come in that way if we would come to our own personal place to stand to say, "I stand in my truth. This is my vision. I have seen something and I live by it and its illumination floods my life."

Nonetheless, it is possible to move beyond that group identity to a personal vision which can be absolutely transforming and liberating, and maybe if I said it against its opposite, it will make some sense. Recently someone put in my hands a magazine called *Islam*, and this very nice glossy magazine had on the cover, "Discovering the Truth: What Islam Stands For," and when I went to the lead article, it gives some of the history of Mohammed. It was during one of those times in a cave that God sent his first revelation to Mohammed. Mohammed was now the final messenger of God and would be used to deliver the universal message to all humankind. The Archangel Gabriel came to Mohammed and commanded, "Read." Mohammed, terrified, replied, "I'm not a reader," for he could neither read nor write, as literacy where he lived was rare. The angel took hold of him, squeezed him with incredible force, released him and repeated the command, "Read." Mohammed repeated himself and once again the angel squeezed him until Mohammed thought he could bear it no longer. After the

third time, Mohammed felt the intense ringing of bells and heard Gabriel recite the literal word of God, words so powerful that it felt like they were inscribed on his heart, "Read, in the name of your Lord who created you." He ran from the cave in terror, trying to escape the intense and frightening experience, but everywhere he looked on the horizon, he saw Gabriel. He could not escape, but he had already been chosen. Over a period of twenty-three years, the revelation continued to come.

It is a magazine like *Christianity Today* or a house organ like *The Banner* of the Christian Reformed Church or *The Church Herald* of the Reformed Church. It is very nicely done and it presents the truth of Islam while it says "Discover the Truth: What Islam Stands For." And then it gives accounts like this and I was reminded as I read it of much Christian literature that assumes again, quite naturally, this is the truth. Gabriel did visit Mary, the virgin Mary. Do you believe that? If you believe that, do you believe this? If you believe this, then there is a revelation beyond what is here, a final revelation, a final testament. The respective religions claim to have the truth and so I say, "I'm a Muslim," or "I'm a Christian," then my truth is defined for me. There is a dogma, there is a teaching. It is all there in creedal expression and confessional statement, in ritual form. All of the accoutrements of the religious experience of the respective traditions, all of them assume a kind of literality about their truthfulness and its congruence with reality as it is. So, if you belong to such a group, you don't have to have your own truth. You could have group-think.

Now, once again to set this over against what I want to get at this morning. I often have people say to me, "We don't believe that!" Oh, don't we? Who is we? We don't believe that, or we believe so and so. We do? As a group, as a community. Have we all thought it through? Have we all come to a personal appropriation of that community expression? Hardly. We find our identity in that group connection, just like we find our identity in the U.S. of A. or the Red Wings who won again last night. We get our identity out of that kind of group affiliation and we simply become a part of it, and I want to suggest to you this morning that there is the possibility of a transformation when one can move beyond that group-think, beyond that traditional statement, to one's own truth, to one's own vision. There is the possibility of finding one's being transformed here and now, coming to that epiphany saying, "Oh, I see!" To have eyes to see and ears to hear the same old thing in a brand new way, which can be transformative.

Paul was such a person. You may say, "Oh, yes, Paul. Thank you very much, I'm not Paul. I'm never going to be knocked off my horse by a blinding light from heaven. I'm just ordinary. Don't push me too much."

But, think of Paul. Of course, Paul was a religious genius. I think Paul was one of those special vessels, one whose epiphany becomes epiphanic for a whole community of people who probably more than Jesus is responsible for the shape of the Christian faith and Christian tradition. Paul, and I read his little

autobiographical piece, was deeply traditioned. He had the right connections, the right parents, the right bloodlines, the right sacramental ritual discipline, the right affiliation in terms of Pharisee concern for the serious observance of the law, engaged and zealous, so he confesses, "I persecuted the Church." In terms of being responsible to that tradition that he had embraced, blameless. He sets all that forth because he says, "I set it all to the side, because of this transforming vision that I had."

I simply lift Paul up as one who was so deeply traditioned, but by the grace of God was able to move out of the hedgerows and the binding narrowness of a strong tradition into a grand and glorious freedom that enabled him to soar. Paul experienced the transformation such that it knocked his socks off, and perhaps that is rare, but I hold him up as an example of what can happen and to make the point that all of that tradition, all of that structure, all of that ritual, all of those creedal statements and confessional expressions - all of it is the scaffolding through which and by which the building is erected. And all of it is good and all of it is valuable and all of it is of worth, because you can't erect the building from ground up without all of that paraphernalia, and neither can you come to your truth, to your personal vision, to that which you'd die for because it enables you to live. You cannot come to that, either, without the help and the aid of all of the agencies of the religious experience. All of those things are simply the means to the end of the vision of God that sets you free. That is the transforming thing of Paul. It was not a matter of Paul, the Jew, becoming a Christian. There wasn't even Christianity at the time. Paul was born a Jew and died a Jew as Jesus was born a Jew and died a Jew.

This was not a conversion from one religion to another. This was a conversion about the *understanding* of religion, that religion is not a burden to be borne, not a routine to be followed, an obligation to be executed, but religion, all of it, is to be entered into and practiced in order that we might be set free from religion, in order that we might play fast and loose with it, in order that we might live lightly with it, valuing it for what it is and continuing to make it available in order that it might continue to be the agent of nurture and formation, but then, to recognize that it can be shuck off in order that one can have wings to soar.

A pastor is crazy to tell his people that. The philosopher George Santayana wrote this marvelous statement:

Ultimate insights (now, that's what we are talking about) *have a tendency to undermine the orthodox approaches by which they have been reached.*

Wow! Did you get that? *Ultimate insights* have a tendency to undermine the orthodox approaches by which they have been reached. The saint pulls his ladder up with him into his private heaven. I get the vision. I see it. I'm thankful for all of the accoutrements of that structure, the community that has brought me to the point where I can fly, and then I pull my ladder up into my private heaven and I don't tell you about it, because otherwise you might think you don't need me

anymore. The community of the faithful on whose sturdy, dogmatic shoulders he has climbed must not be deprived of the means of following his example. In other words, I have to be very careful to talk to you about my truth and to suggest for you your truth, because it is the sturdy shoulders of the dogmatic formulas upon which I have climbed to my vision, and if I undermine the sturdy shoulders of the dogmatic tradition, how will you join me in your private heaven?

Now, of course, I only do this because I can trust you with it. I only do this because you are a mature community. I only do this because somewhere there has to be a community that is honest about the fact that all religious practice is valuable and relative, important and non-essential, and all of it is for the end and the aim of a vision of God that transforms human life and allows community to be a community of peace and reconciliation.

Some years ago, *The Economist* magazine had a special edition on God, and there was a statement in it which I never forgot. It went like this:

The trouble with the world is that there are people who believe they understand God perfectly and they meet other people who think the same way, only differently.

Is that a picture of our world today? While it is necessary, in the nurture and the formation of children and youth, and adults, to create the possibility for the probing of reality, of God, of grace, of meaning through structures that have stood the test of time, it is also high time that as a Church we get honest. I suppose part of it is all of this terrible struggle in the Catholic Church right now, and all of this language about the Holy Father and all of the folderol about the robes and braids and miters, and I see all of that and I think, "Religion institutionalized is a sickness."

But, I don't know how else to create the possibility of you coming to your own truth unless we continue to think, probe, worship, engage in our ritual, and then trust that now and again, here and there, someone will say, "Ah, I see! I see! I see!" And one or two a year makes it all worthwhile