

DO YOU NOT BELIEVE

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Central United Methodist Church

May 23, 2010

(John 14:8-17) Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." {9} Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" {10} Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. {11} Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. {12} Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. {13} I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. {14} If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. {15} "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. {16} And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. {17} This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

A QUEST FOR TRUTH

A lady in a faded gingham dress and her husband, dressed in a homespun threadbare suit, stepped off the train in Boston and walked timidly without an appointment into the Harvard University President's outer office. The secretary could tell in a moment that such backwoods, country hicks had no business at Harvard and probably didn't even deserve to be in Cambridge. She frowned. "*We want to see the President,*" the man said softly.

"He'll be busy all day," the secretary snapped.

"We'll wait," the lady replied. For hours, the secretary ignored them, hoping that the couple would finally become discouraged and go away. They didn't and the secretary grew frustrated and finally decided to disturb the President.

"Maybe if they just see you for a few minutes, they'll leave," she told him. He sighed in exasperation and nodded. Someone of his importance obviously didn't have the time to spend with them, but he detested gingham dresses and homespun suits cluttering up his outer office.

The President strutted toward the couple and asked if he could help them. The lady spoke up and told the President, *"We had a son who attended Harvard for one year. He loved Harvard. He was happy here. A year ago, he was accidentally killed. My husband and I would like to erect a memorial to him, somewhere on campus."*

"Madam," the president said gruffly. *"We can't put up a statue for every person who attends. If we did, this place would look like a cemetery."*

"Oh, no," the lady explained quickly. *"We don't want to erect a statue. We thought we would give a building to Harvard."* The president rolled his eyes. He glanced at the gingham dress and homespun suit and exclaimed, *"A building! Do you have any earthly idea how much a building costs? We have over seven and a half million dollars in the physical plant at Harvard."*

For a moment, the lady was silent. The president was pleased. He could get rid of them now. The lady turned to her husband and said quietly, *"Is that all it costs to start a university? Why don't we just start our own?"* Her husband nodded in agreement.

The President's face wilted in confusion and bewilderment. Mr. and Mrs. Leland Stanford left the president's office, traveling to Palo Alto, California where they established the university that bears their name, Stanford University, a memorial to a son that Harvard did not care about.¹

When I first read this story a few years ago, I thought *"What a great story for a sermon."* I soon discovered it wasn't true. It's pure fiction made up by some unscrupulous individual and then sent out across the internet to tug at unsuspecting reader's hearts. Over the last few years, I've grown to become more suspicious especially of anything sent to me

¹www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/Stanford.htm. Accessed April, 25, 2007.

through email or over the internet. More perplexing is the fact that it is getting harder and harder to delineate between truth and fiction. It's rather frustrating when you think about it. Before I go any further, let me set the record straight and tell you the real story of Stanford University.

In 1876, Leland Stanford, then governor of California, bought 8,000 acres of land on the San Francisco Peninsula. Leland and Jane Stanford had one son, Leland Jr. He never attended Harvard. He wasn't killed but died from Typhoid fever while on a family trip to Italy. Within a few hours of his son's death, Stanford said to his wife, "***The children of California shall be our children.***"²

That was the true beginning of Stanford University. Why can't people just tell the truth? I'm not interested in some syrupy, fictitious story made up to play on my emotions. No wonder people are suspicious of everything they read and hear. What are we supposed to believe?

We see Philip struggling with the same issue as he confronts Jesus, "***Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.***" Philip wants evidence of truth and who can blame him! The world was just as full of deceivers and half-truth tellers in the first century as it is today.

THE STRUGGLE TO BELIEVE

I feel nothing but empathy for Philip and his skeptic stance. There is also that part of me that wants to believe. That is the reason I usually believe what people tell me until they give me a reason not to believe, which puts me in a position of questioning everything else they say or proclaim. When it comes to Jesus, though, I want to hear and claim Jesus' promise that he is . . . "***the way the truth and the life.***" I don't want to doubt Jesus. I need a way into truth. I need to be awakened to what is real. I need and want a real Christ presence in my life and I believe you do also.

²Ibid.

I find it helpful to understand that the Greek word for truth means “*unveiling*” or “*Uncovering*.” To uncover the truth I have to dig, sift and look through life’s contradictions, half-truths and enigmas for what is real. I have to spend time peeling back the onion, so to speak, in order to get to what is real. This is what Albert Schweitzer tried to do when he wrote the *Quest for the Historical Jesus*. There are others today like Albert Nolan and many in the Emergent Church movement who are suggesting that the Jesus we know is corrupted by Greco Roman Philosophy and that we need to come at Jesus through the Old Testament. In other words, we need to go backwards in order to go forward so we can really get to the core of what Jesus is saying and teaching.

I think they may be on to something because we are living in an age where, as Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw in the *Externally Focused Quest* put it, there is a lot of noise out there and it’s hard to tune in to the “*God Channel*.” A little history lesson might be helpful at this point.

For a long time in history of the world, the only channel you could get with the God channel. It didn’t matter where you set your dial, the God channel was everywhere. It was the only channel. God was the reason the sun came up, the rain fell, the crops grew and the harvest came. Then in the 15th and 16th century, we begin to understand more about how the world operates. We grew in our understanding of the mechanics of life on earth. The more we understood through science and mathematics, the less we needed God. We still needed God, though, for those things we couldn’t explain. Theologians called it “*God in the gaps*.”

For a long time the God channel and the modern channel co-existed alongside each other. You could still get the God channel so-to-speak but you had to put aluminum foil on your rabbit ears.

Today, we are living in a time a great seismic shift. With all the scientific and technological advances, we have become a channel surfing culture. We have 1,500 channels available on our HD, flat screen entertainment centers. We live in a world where only 3 out of 10 adults

believe that there is any absolute moral truth. For anyone under the age of 30, the number drops to less than 2 out of 10. The point is that there are so many things to believe in that if we are not careful we end up believing in nothing.³

So how do we get to the point in our lives where we can believe? Most important is how can we believe that we are loved by God and that Jesus is the way, the truth and life? How can we believe that Jesus is life everlasting?

WE LEARN TRUTH DIRECTLY

For me, it started at an early age. I learned some truths directly. I was born on February 19, 1959. My father was pastor of Oak Ridge Methodist at the time. The parsonage and church were on a busy road easily accessed through the front door. When I was old enough, my parents told me to never walk or ride my tricycle into the road because it was dangerous. I was taught that the road was a deadly place for a young child. As I grew older, I was taught other truths:

- I was taught things that would keep me safe:
 - Don't touch the hot stove. It will burn you.
 - Be careful on the steps. You could fall and break a bone.
 - Don't run with a knife in your hand. You could fall and stab yourself.
- I was taught rule of respect and courtesy:
 - Say ***"please"*** and ***"thank you."***
 - Say ***"yes sir and yes maim"*** and ***"no sir and no maim."***
- I was taught there were 26 letters in the alphabet and that sentences always start with a capital letter.
- I was taught that if I was going to have certain things I would have to earn the money myself. That's why I started mowing yards I the 4th grade. I paid for my own care and other luxuries with my own hard-earned money.

³Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw, *The Externally Focused Quest* (San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, 2010), 17-18.

- Much of what I hold sacred in my faith today I learned directly:
 - Sunday is for Sabbath
 - Honor your father and mother
 - God is love
 - Thou shalt not steal

Like your list, my list could go on forever. Many of the things I believe I learned early. They were direct lessons. This kind of direct learning from a parent, teacher, counselor, or pastor is one of the ways we learned what we quite possibly still believe today. It's part of what forms us as we grow to become adults. This kind of truth learning is essential if we are going to be safe, mature, and respectful adults. This form of learning doesn't take much thinking on our part because an authority figure tells us and we obey and accept it. Eventually we move off the plateau of direct learning and move on to learning indirectly.

WE LEARN TRUTH INDIRECTLY

Many of the things we believe in we learn indirectly. We learn indirectly when stories or parables are told by our parents, grandparents or family friends. As we absorb these stories, our world is transformed and sometimes turned in new directions. As we mature, we realize that some of the stories told as gospel truth were probably stretched, exaggerated or maybe not true. Other stories stick in our psyche as a kind of profound truth that must never be forgotten.

I can still remember a story my grandfather used to tell us whenever we visited his business, a machine shop in Greensboro, North Carolina. I loved the machine shop with all of its big lathes, presses and drills. We would always get a safety lecture before we would walk into the shop where granddad would tell us about all his latest projects and inventions. One time he ended his safety lecture with a story about a recent accident.

It was the early seventies when many men wore their hair long just like the women. My grandfather was constantly telling his employees that they needed to wear hairnets when they were working around the fast

moving lathes and drills. Everyone hated the nets and tried to get by without wearing them.

The day finally came when one of the female employees got her hair caught in a lathe ripping half her scalp away. It was a serious injury. It could have killed her but she managed to survive. My grandfather said that when he walked into the shop the next day, everyone had on his or her hairnet. For those at the shop that was a direct learning experience. I learned it indirectly through my grandfather's story. To this day, whenever I'm around a piece of dangerous machinery, I think of my grandfather's story and in an indirect way it makes me more cautious.

WE LEARN TRUTH INCARNATELY

As we mature, we begin to learn truth incarnately. In other words, we learn it through other people. When we learn from another person who impresses us, then we gain truth from that person. You might say we have something to believe in. With all the static in the world, we need to be careful from whom we learn the truth.

We say that Jesus was God incarnate. God had something to say to us but we weren't listening so God decided to show us. God had to wrap up his truth in the person of Jesus Christ so we could see it incarnately. The Word, God's truth, "*became flesh and dwelt among us.*" I think this speaks volumes to the 21st century church. Like the 1st century church, we need to become externally focused again. We need to be God incarnate in our communities so that those who don't know the truth of Jesus Christ, who are trying to live in the midst of the confusing static of the world, will have something to believe in that can really make a difference.

WE LEARN TRUTH EXPERIENTIALLY

It is only when we experience God incarnate that we are able to learn truth experientially. One of greatest teachers of truth is experience. Experience reinforces our beliefs. That's the reason our children need

good role models and parents who are involved in their lives. It's why the church is still important and why we must get outside the walls to those who do not know, much less believe, in the power of God's love through Jesus Christ.

In Clyde Edgerton's novel *Walking Across Egypt*, he tells the story of a faithful and loving lady named Mattie Rigsbee. Mattie lives alone, goes to Sunday school and church. She adores everyone she meets. She is a constant reflection of God's grace and care. Eventually she meets a young man named Wesley. Wesley comes from a broken home and has spent a good deal of his teenage years in reformatory school. Mattie takes the teenager into her home. She feeds him, clothes him and gives him a comfortable bed to sleep in. She takes Sunday school and church. Nothing Wesley has done, she is convinced, is so bad that God can't forgive him. Eventually Wesley cannot stand all the goodness in Mattie's house; it simply overwhelms him. He steals her car and tries to make a getaway. He's caught and brought back. Eventually Mattie's love triumphs over Wesley so in a future novel he professes his faith in Christ and becomes a minister. There is so much love in Mattie's heart that nothing can resist it and live in the same house with her.⁴

In a world where the evidence no longer convicts people of God's presence in Jesus Christ, we need those who are willing to take their experience of God's love into the world so that others might believe what we know, ***"That God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son so that we might have life everlasting."***

Philip and the other disciples believed so much that they took what they knew into the world. Will we?

⁴Clyde Edgerton, *Walking Across Egypt* (New York, NY: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1987).