

Rev Sally's Sermon January 24, 2021

What is truth? That's a hard question right now. It depends on who you're listening to- Public radio, or Fox News, CNN, or one of several social media platforms. Many media outlets provide their own take on the truth, so it's difficult to know what the real truth is. I used to think that I was pretty good at deciphering the truth but right now the problem is that there are so many sources claiming to have the truth, it's hard to know who does.

Discerning truth was also a question for St. Paul. Today is the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, our patron saint. In today's lesson from Acts, we hear the story of how Paul came to know the truth. Paul was an 'up and coming' leader in the Jewish community. He was determined to root out a corrupting influence in the Jewish community, a group of people who followed a man named Jesus, who they claimed was the Messiah. Paul believed he knew the truth and this claim about Jesus violated everything Paul believed. Therefore, in today's reading, Paul is on his way to the city of Damascus to arrest as many followers of Jesus as possible.

But on this journey, Paul discovered he was wrong. As he and his companions traveled, they were surrounded by a brilliant light, a light brighter than the sun, a light so strong that it drove Paul to the ground. And then he heard a voice. "Saul, Saul, (Another name for Paul) why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads." "Who are you?" Paul asked. "I am Jesus."

In that moment Paul was confronted with the truth. Jesus was one with God Almighty. It must have been difficult for Paul to admit being wrong. It would have taken great humility. We call this event the "conversion" of St. Paul. To convert is to change, to turn around, to go in a new direction. Why would he do this? Why would he change what he believed? I think Paul's change speaks to the power of his experience. This encounter was strong enough to turn Paul around and send him in a new direction. In this experience, he must have found the life of God.

Sometimes we are called to make a change in our lives. We are called to turn around, to go in a new direction, to admit we might have been wrong. As with Paul, it can be difficult because it takes humility. But often we find that the change is worth it because it's that change that leads to life.

But how do we know which change leads to life? How do we recognize the voice that reveals the truth of God? I have found several sources to be helpful. First prayer. When I turn to God and pour out my heart, I've found that Jesus will meet me just like he met Paul on that road to Damascus. I may not hear a voice with my ears, but I do find that the same Holy Spirit will whisper to my heart. Sometimes this listening takes the form of holy silence. Sometimes it's the words written in my journal that reveal my thoughts, feelings, and insights.

Another way that I know God's truth is by "reading and meditating on God's holy Word. I have found that, if I will keep my heart open, God will speak to me through his scripture. At times, I have been surprised when I have thought I knew the right way, but then the Word of God revealed that I was following not God's truth but my own.

Another way that we know the truth of God is to listen to others. Often God uses others to speak his truth to us. In another version of today's story of Paul's conversion, we hear about a man named Ananias who met Paul after his vision, prayed for Paul's healing and then baptized him into faith in Jesus. Ananias took a risk going to Paul. Ananias was one of the men Paul wanted to arrest. But when Ananias spoke the truth that he knew and when Paul listened, then God's truth was shared.

As we listen to each other, we will share God's truth. God calls us to show dignity and respect to each other. A willingness to listen to each other is part of that. Listening may not come easily. It has to be intentional and it takes practice. But it is possible to increase our ability to listen. Sometimes when another is speaking, we spend our energy organizing our rebuttal rather than really listening to what the other has to say. It helps if we will suspend our urge to defend our own position. In order to really listen it will take time and curiosity about the other person. It also helps to put ourselves in the other person's shoes, appreciating their concerns and experiences. When we listen, we will be giving dignity and respect to each other. And as we do, God's truth will be revealed.

As we study God's word, as we turn our hearts to God in prayer and as we listen to each other, God will be present among us and his truth will be revealed. This may mean that we'll make a change in life, it may mean we'll seek a new direction, it may even mean that we'll admit to being wrong, as Paul did. But it will be worth the change because where the truth is, there the life of God will reign.