Saturday, April 9, 1988
KNOWING THE TRUTH (Doane College)
John 18:28-38

When Fred Brown was planning this inauguration weekend, he mentioned that he wanted one of the events to be a worship service that would highlight the religious roots of Doane College and its continuing relationship with the United Church of Christ.

As most of you already know, the United Church of Christ came into being in 1957 as a merger of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Both of these denominations had, from their own beginnings, a strong interest in education, especially the education of the clergy.

The Pilgrims landed in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620, and only 18 years later, in 1638, founded Harvard College — its primary function being, in the beginning, the education of clergy. Not long after, Yale was founded in New Haven, Connecticut, and then many other schools were also started — Dartmouth, Amherst, Oberlin, Beloit, Carleton, Drury, Grinnell, Doane, and many more.

The Evangelical and Reformed Church, with its roots in the German Reformation of the 16th century, also believed very strongly in the value of education and in having an educated clergy. Thus, its predecessors, the Evangelical Synod of North America and the German Reformed Church, were instrumental in founding several seminaries and a number of colleges and academies.

Both the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church come out of a 16th-century Reformation heritage that believes we human beings can come to know more about God's creation and about God's will and purpose not only by studying the Bible and the life of Jesus but also by inquiring into as many other fields of knowledge as possible. In fact, we believe it is God's will that we explore this creation so that we can better appreciate it, understand it, and care for it. We believe that God's revelation to us does not begin and end with the Bible.

It was out of the Congregational heritage that Doane College came into being. Colonel Thomas Doane had been a deacon and superintendent of the Sabbath School in the Winthrop Church in Massachusetts. He had also become closely acquainted with some of the leading church people in Nebraska, especially the Reverend Reuben Gaylord, the first Congregational minister and missionary in Nebraska. It was Gaylord who was largely instrumental in establishing the Nebraska Association of Congregational Churches.

Thus, it was Colonel Thomas Doane, along with the Nebraska Congregational Association, who got Doane College started in 1872. Thomas Doane had persuaded the Burlington Railroad, for whom he worked, to donate the land. Since that time, Doane College has seen itself as being a college related to the Congregational Christian Churches and, since the merger in 1957, to the United Church of Christ.

With this history in mind, I want us to consider briefly this morning how education informed by our understanding of the Christian faith might be different or unique. Or, to put the question another way — what contribution does our particular understanding of Christian spirituality have to make in our search for the truth and in what we understand to be the truth?

In attempting to provide some answers to this question, I have been greatly influenced by a book entitled To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey, by Parker J. Palmer.

To begin with, I believe many of us who are well-educated have been schooled in a way that views the world as an object to be dissected and manipulated, a way of knowing that gives us power over the world. We have been trained to use our knowledge to rearrange the world to satisfy our drive for power and our greed, distorting and deranging life rather than loving and savoring life for the gift it is.

A recent Carnegie Commission survey of American undergraduates reveals that some of the best-educated of our young women and men are darkly pessimistic about the future of their country and their world. They are, among other things, fearful of the economy, pollution, crime, morals, energy, and nuclear war. But at the same time, they are brightly optimistic about their personal futures. They believe the knowledge they have gained through education — especially the access it gives them to their professions — will enable them to carve out a niche of private safety and sanity in the midst of public calamity. They believe they can win while everyone around them is losing.

The researchers cite this interview as typical:

Interviewer: Will the United States be a better or worse place to live in the next ten years?

Student: The United States will definitely be a worse place to live.

Interviewer: Then you must be pessimistic about the future?

Student: No, I'm optimistic.

Interviewer: (With surprise) Why?

Student: Because I have a high grade point average, and I'm going to get a good job, make a lot of money, and live in a nice house.

Such students have come to believe that the world is an object to be manipulated, and though they have lost the idealism of some previous generations that the whole world can be rearranged, they still believe that a small part of it can be organized to suit their personal needs.

But now let's ask a prior and deeper question: Where does our knowledge come from? What is the motivation that makes us want to know more?

History suggests two primary motivations for our knowledge. One is curiosity; the other is the desire to control or gain power. Curiosity corresponds to pure, speculative knowledge, to knowledge as an end in itself — the joy of knowing more. Control or power is wanting to know more so as to be able to control more, to have more mastery over life. Curiosity and the desire for power are joined as the passion behind much of our knowing.

As a result, in much of conventional education, students tend to become manipulators of each other and the world rather than mutually responsible participants and co-creators. It is easy to become manipulators when we are schooled to be detached spectators of a world “out there.”

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is helpful here. That story, which says that we were first formed in the image of love, also tells how that image was deformed by the actions of Adam and Eve. God knew their human limits and so commanded them not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They disobeyed. They reached for knowledge that was beyond their limits, that would make them like God. The sin, the error, was not their hunger for knowledge. They were driven from the Garden because of the kind of knowledge they reached for — a knowledge that distrusted and excluded God. Their drive to know arose not from love but from curiosity and the desire for power, from the desire to possess powers belonging to God alone. They failed to honor the fact that God knew them first, knew them in their limits as well as their potentials. In their refusal to know as they were known, they reached for a kind of knowledge that always leads to death.

But according to our Christian faith, another kind of schooling is available to us, one that begins in a different passion and is directed toward other goals. This is a knowledge that originates not only in curiosity or control but in compassion for life — a source not always celebrated in our intellectual tradition, but in our Christian spiritual heritage.

Here’s the way Dr. Parker J. Palmer puts it: “The goal of knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds. A knowledge born of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation, but at reconciling the world to itself. The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here, the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own.”

Our Christian spiritual tradition claims that the origin of knowledge is love. The deepest wellspring of our desire to know is the passion to recreate the organic community in which the world was first created.

It is the Christian tradition, whose central claim is not that God takes us out of ourselves and our world into ethereal realms, but that God broke in to reveal us and our world as we are. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.”

In Christian tradition, truth is not a concept that works, but an incarnation that lives. It understands truth to be embodied in personal terms, the terms of one who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Where conventional education deals with abstract and impersonal facts and theories, an education shaped by Christian spirituality draws us toward incarnate and personal truth. In this education, we come to know the world not simply as an objectified system of empirical objects in logical connection with each other but as an organic body of personal relations and responses, a living and evolving community of creativity and compassion. Education of this sort means more than teaching the facts and learning the reasons so we can manipulate life toward our ends. It means being drawn into personal responsiveness and accountability to each other and the world of which we are a part.

Earlier in this worship service, we heard the story read from the Gospel of John wherein Jesus is brought before Pilate for trial. Pilate asks Jesus if he is the king of his people. Jesus

answers, “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” Pilate angrily responds that he is not one of Jesus’ people and that they have handed Jesus over to be tried, and demands that Jesus explain why, asking, “What have you done?” Jesus replies, “My kingship is not of this world,” and as proof, he reminds Pilate that his followers did not fight the authorities to resist his arrest and trial. Pilate, desperately trying to make worldly sense of this unworldly argument, cries, “So you are a King?” Jesus replies, “You say that I am a king. For this, I was born and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.” And Pilate asks Jesus the famous question, “What is truth?”

Notice that Pilate asked, “What is truth?” The bias is in the word “what?” He is obsessed with the “whatness,” the objectiveness of truth, while before him stands a person who claims to embody the truth — not an object out there, but a subject who would enter into Pilate’s own subject-life.

The story suggests that in Christian understanding, truth is neither an object out there nor a proposition about such objects. Instead, truth is personal, and all truth is known in personal relationships. Jesus is a paradigm, a model of this personal truth. In him, truth, once understood as abstract, principled, and propositional, suddenly takes on a human face and a human frame. In Jesus, the disembodied “word” takes flesh and walks among us. Jesus calls us to truth, but not in the form of creeds or theologies or worldviews. His call to truth is a call to community — with him, with each other, with creation and its Creator.

The point about Jesus as a paradigm of personal truth has often been and is still frequently distorted, sometimes by persons outside Christian tradition, but most damagingly by persons within. Christians have too often spoken of “knowing Jesus” in a way that tends toward one of two extremes. Either the believer “knows” Jesus in a way that excuses him or her from knowing anything else (like physics or psychology or English literature) or the believer keeps the “knowledge” of Jesus in a compartment labeled “religious” and engages in other forms of knowing as if there were no connection.

When Christians “know” Jesus in these ways, it is right and proper for others to reject their “truth” as either irrelevant to the rest of life or productive of the sort of principled ignorance that has bred so much evil.

When Jesus said, “I am the truth,” he was not making a claim about an isolated individual or inviting us into a single and separate relationship with him, a relationship that is everything so that we need nothing else. Nor was Jesus claiming that his mind contained all the truth. Rather, he was leading us into a new understanding of reality and our relation to it. Truth — wherever it may be found and in whatever form — is to be found in relationships. The search for truth becomes the quest for community, and this community consists of more than other human selves. We are also in community with the material world, with plants and animals, with God. Our human nature links us up and down that “great chain of being,” with the divine in whose image we were created and with the earth through which that creation arose. We are but one link in that chain, and our knowing must take account of all the other links. To live in ignorance or disdain of any of these connections is to put our own lives, and all other life, at peril.

Doane College and other colleges similar to it have a unique opportunity because of our spiritual heritage to continue to lead us in this kind of search for truth. Amen.