Sunday, April 24, 1988
LIVING THE TRUTH
John 18:33-38

Today is United Church of Christ College Heritage Sunday throughout our denomination, a day when we remember that our denomination, through its predecessors, has been responsible for establishing a number of academies, colleges, universities, and seminaries in this country and other countries as well.

Presently, the United Church of Christ lists 30 colleges, 2 academies, and 15 seminaries as being related to our denomination through an organization known as the Council for Higher Education. One of our own ministers, Jane Ellefson, is a member of that Council and also a member of its Executive Committee.

This morning, in this sermon, we are going to look at two questions in relation to higher education and our Christian faith:

How and why did our forefathers and mothers in our tradition become involved in establishing colleges and seminaries?
How can education informed and influenced by our understanding of the Christian faith be different or unique from education in general? Or to put the question another way — what contribution can our particular understanding of Christian spirituality make in our search for the truth and in living the truth?
The First Question: Why Our Tradition Values Education

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 early Congregationalists landed in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620, and only 16 years later, in 1636, founded Harvard College (now Harvard University)—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 — among them Dartmouth, Amherst, Oberlin, Beloit, Carleton, Drury, Grinnell, and Doane College in Crete, Nebraska, in 1872, 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 of 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.

Why did these church bodies start all these schools? 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 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 and understand it so that we can better care for it. We believe that God’s revelation does not end with the Bible.

We believe, as H. Richard Niebuhr put it, that “Faith in God involves us in a permanent revolution of the mind and of the heart, a continuous life which opens out infinitely into ever new possibilities.”

The Second Question: How Our Faith Shapes Education

Now let’s look at the second question. How does our understanding of the Christian faith inform the way in which we go about and understand education? Or, another way of asking the question: What contribution does our understanding of Christian spirituality have to make in our search for the truth and in living the truth?

To begin with, I believe that many of us who are well-educated have been schooled in a way of knowing that leads us to see the world as an object to be dissected and manipulated, a way of knowing that has as its purpose giving us power over the world. We have been trained to use our knowledge to rearrange the world to satisfy our greed and our drive for power. Thus, we often find ourselves 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 the 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 else is losing.

The researchers cite this interview as typical:

Interviewer: Will the United States be a better 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 drive for 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 (we human beings are naturally curious people). The other motivation is power, the desire to gain control. Curiosity corresponds to pure speculative knowledge, to knowledge as an end in itself — the joy of knowing more. My dad used to say, “What good is an education if you don’t know how to use it?” He never understood knowledge for the sake of knowledge. If it didn’t have a practical use, it wasn’t any good. Thus, he never knew the joy of reading a good book simply to enjoy it. He only wanted to know those things which would give him control or power or 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, the 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: A Cautionary Tale

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 action 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 a 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 the desire for power, from the desire to want 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.

A Knowledge Born of Love

Our Christian spiritual tradition claims that the true origin of knowledge is love. The deepest wellspring of our desire to make connections, to understand how everything in creation is related to everything else.

A knowledge born of compassion and love for God’s creation aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation, but at reconciling the world to itself. We become gardeners instead of miners.

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 much of 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 to the creation of which we are a part.

But many people do not want to do this. You may have read the article in last Monday morning's Lincoln Star, under the byline of Bob Reeves, one of our church members. He reported that many of today's university students want only the facts. They are not interested in the ethical implications of much of modern knowledge, and when some professors try to engage them in that kind of discussion, they don't like it.

One professor was quoted as saying, "The majority of today's students want information that applies to things they can easily control, like how to process beef, store grain, or balance a checkbook."

Pilate's Question: What is Truth?

Earlier in this worship service, we heard the story read from the Gospel of John, where Jesus is before Pilate for trial. Near the end of Pilate's questioning of Jesus, he asked Jesus what, for Pilate, must've been the ultimate question: "What is truth?"

The bias is in the word "what." Pilate is obsessed, as are many of us, with the "whatness," the objectiveness of truth, while before him stands a person who claims to embody the truth — not an object out there detached from everything else, but someone who desires to be in a relationship with him.

The story suggests that in our 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 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, not in the form of creeds or theologies or world-views. His call to truth is a call to community — with him, with each other, with creation, and with our Creator.

The point about Jesus as a paradigm of personal truth has often been and is still frequently distorted, sometimes by persons outside the 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 is found and in whatever form — is to be found in relationships, in connections. 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 with 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.

Our Christian spiritual heritage leads us to continue this kind of search for truth. Amen.