Sunday, September 8, 1991
WHAT IS TRUTH? (Sermon for UMHE Service)
John 18:28-38

The planning committee for this worship service suggested that the sermon theme be "the nature and meaning of the calling that Christian students, faculty, and staff have in a secular university."

Let's begin with some history of higher education. As most of you know, the first colleges and universities in this country were founded by Christian church people. The Pilgrims landed in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1620, and only 18 years later, in 1638, they founded Harvard College — its primary purpose being the education of clergy. In 1701, Yale College was founded, again started by Christians primarily for the education of clergy. Some historians claim that Yale was founded to offset the defection of Harvard. Increase Mather said, "Harvard, the very glory of New England, was sending forth degenerate graduates who were at once recognized as visible tokens of paradise lost."

As the years passed, Christian church people continued to found institutions of higher education — Dartmouth, Amherst, Oberlin, Beloit, Carleton, Grinnell, and many more. The earliest church college in Nebraska was Doane, founded in 1872, in Crete.

The founders of these schools, and many more like them, had their roots in the German Reformation of the 16th century. An important part of Reformation theology was the belief that we human beings can come to know more about God's creation and about God's will and purpose for creation not only by studying the Bible and the life of Jesus but also by inquiring into as many other fields of knowledge as possible. The founders of these schools believed that it is God's will that we explore this creation so that we can better appreciate it, understand it, and care for it.

Following the church's lead, Land Grant Colleges and other institutions of higher learning were also founded. The University of Nebraska had its beginning on February 15, 1869.

I mention this bit of history to underscore the fact that Christian people have, from the beginning of this country, been vitally interested in the search for truth and in founding institutions for that purpose. Furthermore, I believe that as Christian students, faculty, and staff, we continue to have an important contribution to make in defining what truth is and in the search for truth.

I have been tremendously helped to see this issue in a fresh way by Parker J. Palmer's book, To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education.

According to Parker J. Palmer, one approach to education assumes that the world is an object to be dissected and manipulated. Thus, the purpose of education is to give us more power over the world. In this view, we use our knowledge to rearrange the world to satisfy our greed and our drive for power. We become miners of the world rather than gardeners.

A few years back, a Carnegie Commission Survey of American undergraduates revealed that some of the best-educated of our young women and men were darkly pessimistic about the future of this country and the world. They were, among other things, fearful of the economy, pollution, crime, morals, energy, and nuclear war. But at the same time, they were brightly

optimistic about their personal future. They believed the knowledge they were gaining through education — especially the access it would give them to their professions — would enable them to carve out a niche of private safety and sanity in the midst of public calamity. They believed, in other words, they would win while everyone around them was losing.

The researchers cited 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 make a lot of money, and live in a nice house.”

Such students believe the world is an object to be manipulated and that their personal world, if not the rest of the world, can be organized to meet their personal needs.

This, however, shouldn’t surprise us because it is a view held by many people in our culture. Perhaps you’ve seen the book, The Day America Told the Truth, which contains the results of surveys of the American people. Subtitled, “What People Really Believe About Everything That Matters,” the book is supposed to give us a truthful look at what Americans are really all about.

In one survey, the authors asked Americans what they might change about themselves and how they might fulfill their potential as human beings.

I hoped the most common answers would be statements like: “I would be a better person.” “I would try to do more for others.” “I would try to make a difference in the world.” “I would invest my money and my time in things that have lasting results.”

However, the top two answers were: “I want to be rich.” “I want to be thin.”

History suggests two primary motivations for 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 discovery and knowing more. Control or power is wanting to know more so as to be able to control more, to have more mastery over life. Is it not true that curiosity and the desire for power are joined as the passion behind much of our knowing?

As a result, in some conventional education, students and faculty 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.”

But according to our Christian faith, another kind of search for knowledge and truth is available to us, one that begins in a different passion and is directed toward other goals. This is a search

for truth that originates not only in curiosity but in compassion for life — a source not always celebrated in our intellectual tradition.

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."

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 lives among us in order to reveal us and our world as we are. "The Word became flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth."

Where much of conventional education deals with abstract and impersonal facts and theories, an education informed by our Christian tradition directs 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 towards 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. In the interrogation, Pilate asks Jesus, "What is truth?" The bias is in the word "what." Pilate 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 subjective life.

The story suggests that in the Christian understanding, truth is neither an object out there nor a proposition about such objects. Instead, truth is personal, and truth is known and experienced in relationships. Truth emerges from community. Jesus is a paradigm, a model of this 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, to the discovery of harmony with him, with each other, with creation, and with our Creator. His call is also to always be open to new truth which is constantly emerging.

However, sometimes Jesus as a paradigm of personal truth is distorted, especially by persons inside the Christian tradition. Thus, individuals sometimes speak of "knowing Jesus" in a way that excuses them from knowing anything else (such as 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 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 a search for connections, a quest for community, and this community consists of more than other human selves. We are also in relationship with the material world, with plants and animals, and 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 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 life and all other life at peril.

We who call ourselves Christians — students, faculty, and staff — have a unique opportunity to keep this Christian understanding of truth alive and to continue to lead in this kind of search for truth. Amen.