Sunday, November 23, 1997
WHAT TRUTHS GUIDE YOUR LIFE?
John 18:33-38

One of the problems with preparing and preaching sermons is that because of deadlines, the preacher frequently needs to choose a title for the sermon announcement in the church newsletter before the sermon is prepared. This means that sometimes the title chosen is not the best one. I discovered that again this week. As you listen to this sermon, I think you'll find, as I did when I finished working on it, that a more accurate title is: "Where do you find the truths that guide your life?" instead of "What Truths Guide Your Life?"

When Jesus was brought before the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, to be sentenced to death, Pilate asked him several questions, the last one being, "What is truth?" The writer of the gospel of John does not tell us what answer to this question, if any, Jesus gave. As I read this story over and over again this past week, I believe that Jesus, in his conversation with Pilate, tried to get Pilate to consider a deeper and more relevant question about truth. Instead of asking "what is truth," the more difficult question is a personal one: "Where do you find the truths that guide your life?" It's a question all of us need to ask and answer.

Let's begin by acknowledging that "truth" comes to us in many ways and forms, and that what we sometimes base our life on turns out not to be the truth.

For example, in the Bible, truth comes to us in lists of commandments, such as the Ten Commandments. Truth comes to us as the Hebrews reflect on their relationship to the one God in the Old Testament. Truth comes to us in the actions of Jesus and in his teachings. Truth also comes to us in many of the Bible stories, such as the parables. Above all, the truth about God comes to us in the person of Jesus, the "word made flesh." Thus, he said of himself, "I am the way and the truth and the life."

Here Jesus was saying that truth is more than propositions, more than words in commandments. There are events and persons which bear witness to the truth. Jesus is trying to introduce Pilate to the notion that truth is found sometimes not just in the answers but in the questions themselves.

I mentioned earlier that we human beings especially learn and pass on truths in and through the stories in the Bible and in our stories we remember and tell. That's because all stories reveal underlying assumptions about the way the world works and what is and what is not important in life.

If we listen to the stories we remember and tell, we will discover that they are trying to pass along certain truths. Who is the villain and who is the hero or heroine? Who succeeds and who does not, and why? What is the purpose of life and how does it all turn out in the end? We live by stories, all of us do. We also live by creeds and principles, but mostly by stories. Stories shape our lives, give our lives meaning, direction, energy, and purpose.

In our time, we need to pay particularly close attention to the stories that come to us through the media, especially television. These are the stories of our culture, the stories that tell us who we are and what we are to value. The news programs and soap operas, the sporting events and situation comedies — they are a kind of catechism for our children.

There are some good things and bad things on television, but on commercial television especially, the programs have one thing in common: they are brought to us by people who are trying to sell us things. That's not bad as long as we are aware of it. The underlying theme that unites them is the message that encourages us to learn how to be good consumers. The implication is that this is the purpose of life. It is our duty and our joy.

Of course, it is not stated this openly, although it was by a bumper sticker I saw awhile back: "The one who dies with the most toys wins." It was surprising and refreshing to see it spelled out so starkly. "The one who dies with the most toys wins." For some people, this supposed "truth" seems to guide their lives.

Another ad campaign had as its theme, "Drink a lot of Pepsi, get a lot of stuff." What is the supposed assumption or truth underlying this message? It is telling us, life is a contest, a game of accumulating entertaining and diverting possessions. Life is our chance to get a lot of stuff.

I doubt that many of us would openly admit that this is the story that guides our lives. But if you watch the way we live, what occupies our thoughts, where we concentrate our energies, what fascinates and captivates us, the bumper sticker can seem uncomfortably on target.

The question to ask of such a story, or any story we live by, is this: Does it hold up in the end? Does life really work that way? Does getting and spending really produce satisfaction that will last? Let's be honest. It does up to a point. For example, if I have had an especially difficult day, sometimes I can be cheered by simply walking into a bookstore and acquiring a few more books to add to my collection. It works — for a time. Buying items we enjoy can be a pleasurable diversion that dulls the pain of boredom and gives us something to look forward to.

But is it a story that is big enough to live by, especially when tough times come? Can it hold the weight of human life? Is it a truth upon which to base your life?

The point is, there are some stories which we mistakenly believe carry the truth, but when we examine them more carefully over time, we realize that they are too shallow. There is no call to sacrifice, to stretch, to live for something higher and deeper than meager concerns and desires. They are not realistic enough to be true in the long run. All the toys, trips, promotions, and possessions we can get cannot carry us successfully enough through the pains, disappointments, losses, and reversals that sooner or later will be a part of our lives. They cannot equip us to face the agonies and confusions that come to everyone.

Truths, some which are partial or temporary and others which are eternal, are also revealed and carried in the songs we are taught and sing, especially those songs that pass from one generation to another.

Here are several examples. Remember the song, "Itsy-Bitsy Spider." It's taught in almost every young children's music class, complete with all of its hand motions. What truth does the song teach about life? The truth is that from the spider's perspective, life is one routine after another. The spider climbs up the water spout while the sun is shining, then comes the rain and washes the spider down, and when the sun comes out, the spider repeats the routine. The song contains a certain truth about life, not only for spiders but for us.

Ask the homemaker who tries valiantly to keep the family's house picked up and looking decent. Each one of us knows what it's like to start over and over again, constantly climbing up the water spout, even though we know the rain is coming and we'll be washed down again.

There is also a truth about life contained in the lullaby, “Rock-a-Bye-Baby.” This song has a long and cherished career from generation to generation. You remember the words: “Rock-a-bye baby in the treetop, when the wind blows the cradle will rock, when the bough breaks the cradle will fall, down will come baby cradle and all.” We don’t know if the baby is hurt or not from the falling, but we do know that there are boughs that break in everyone’s life and sometimes people are hurt. Life can unexpectedly jolt us with loss, pain, betrayal, and death.

To be alive and living in this world is to live in the midst of falling branches, failing relationships. Life is difficult. Life is complex. Life is unfair. Life is filled with surprises and not all of them are good. These are truths that we learn as we grow and mature. They are a part of each one of our lives.

What are some of the tests we can apply to determine which stories contain the kind of truths which will sustain us in good times and bad, those truths which are eternal and not temporary?

One of the most inspiring books I’ve read in the last 8 years is Fear No Evil, by Natan Sharansky. It’s his personal story of being in a Soviet prison in the 1970s. A computer specialist, Sharansky became in the seventies a spokesman for Moscow’s dissidents — the Jews, like himself, seeking to emigrate to Israel and the human rights advocates, such as Andrei Sakharov. He was eventually charged with treason and threatened with execution. He was arrested at the age of 29 and, in the book, he tells of his sixteen months of punishment and torture in prison.

How did he survive? The title of the book, Fear No Evil, gives the answer. Raised as a Jew, in prison he rediscovered a truth to sustain him — his religious faith, and especially the truth as remembered in the Psalms. To survive and even flourish at the hands of the KGB is an ultimate achievement in courage, and that is what Sharansky did. The 23rd Psalm especially became the truth upon which he based his life. The phrase, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me,” is what kept him going and gave him hope.

That certainly is a good test of the truths we choose to live by: Can I take these truths to prison with me? Would they sustain me even there? I don’t expect any of you listening to ever be in prison, so you might ask instead, “Can I take these truths to the hospital with me when I am facing a life-threatening medical condition? Would these truths sustain me there?” Many stories or truths might be sufficient when life is gentle and bright. But what story or truth will hold up when life is hard and rough?

Another test to apply to an eternal truth upon which you can base your life is this: Can the truth be set to music, contained in a song that will last? The saying on the bumper sticker, “The one who dies with the most toys wins,” could become the lyric to a song, but I doubt that the song would endure over a period of time. Would it be a song that you wanted to pass on to the next generation? In the same vein, it’s not likely that we’ll be singing hymns praising selfishness or with words, “Joyful, joyful, we adore ourselves.”

Where do you find the truths that guide your life? We find them in such songs as “Joyful, joyful we adore you, God of glory, God of love. Hearts unfold like flowers before you, opening to the sun above. Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, drive the dark of doubt away. Giver of immortal gladness. Fill us with the light of day.”

What is the truth about life? “Joyful, joyful, we adore you, God of glory, God of love.” The ultimate truth is that no matter how serious the grind, how grinding the tragedy, God’s love shines through. That’s what Sharansky discovered in the Soviet prison. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me.” That’s a song of truth that has been passed from generation to generation. This is the kind of truth upon which Mother Teresa and others like her based their lives.

Earlier this fall, on September 2, a man named Viktor Emil Frankl died at age 92. Because of the death of Princess Diana around the same time, his death did not make the headlines. It was mentioned only in several small news stories.

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian Jew who was arrested in 1942 while working in a Vienna hospital and spent the next three years in four Nazi death camps, among them Auschwitz. Dr. Frankl’s father, mother, brother, and wife all died in the camps. He not only survived in the basement of wickedness, but later as a psychiatrist, he used his experience to devise a therapy that, one way or another, has enabled many people to refashion their lives when they might have given up.

When Viktor Frankl was freed at the end of the war, he wrote a book, Man’s Search for Meaning, which has sold some 9 million copies in numerous languages. He wrote 31 other books. Nobody who has ever read the book can forget it.

In the death camps, he discovered the deep eternal truth that prisoners like himself gave meaning to their lives simply by helping others through the day and that in so doing they themselves were more likely to survive. The door to happiness, he said, always opens outward. Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” My hope for you is that you will ask yourself a more personal question: “What are the truths that guide and direct my life? Are they temporary and shallow? Or are they based on the solid foundation of faith in a loving and eternal God?” Amen.