Message May 3, 2015

Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest, well known preacher, and the author of among other books*, An altar in the World,* the book we are currently studying here on Sunday mornings prior to our worship service. In an interview published in *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* she makes this observation:

Having been brought up with a definition of faith as an adherence to a set of beliefs, I have more and more begun to turn instead toward a definition of faith as openness to truth, whatever truth may turn out to be.

If you ponder on that quote a bit you’ll come to realize it’s more than a casual sound bite. It’s a rather substantial and weighty statement. A substantial statement in that I suspect, at least in part, it is a portrait of our own personal journeys of faith. And, weighty in its vagueness about truth – truth, that thing usually considered an absolute.

Listen to the quote again.

Having been brought up with a definition of faith as an adherence to a set of beliefs, I have more and more begun to turn instead toward a

definition of faith as openness to truth, whatever truth may turn out to be.

It’s worth taking a moment to dissect that statement into its two parts. The first part says in effect that I’ve been brought up on a faith that has some given rules and regulations - beliefs. I suspect that scenario applies to just about everyone in this room if you were brought up as a Roman Catholic or a Protestant of whatever flavor. I know it applies to my history. As a young person, we each had to go through some sort of “education” so that we would know, if not understand, the sign posts of our faith and likely how our faith was different from other, similar faiths. And, quite likely how our faith was unique (e.g. correct or more correct) than other faiths that also label themselves as Christian. If you came into the church as an adult you also had to become acquainted with the main beliefs of that particular faith system. And, whether youth or adult you had to express, often publically to the already certified believers, belief in and/or adherence to those beliefs in order to be accepted into that faith system as a member. If you joined a traditional UCC congregation you were previously baptized or baptized prior to becoming a member, and, witnessed by the congregation, you professed your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior or reaffirmed that faith if you previously belonged to another Christian church. You likely also answered “I do” and “I will” to statements related to the UCC Statement of Faith, and to pledges of your support for the congregation, which in turn pledged its support of you.

Was that good or bad? Neither. It gave you a grounding, an identity. You were now part of an established vine, a branch. A branch that could now, without reservation or hesitation, contribute to the vine and draw strength from it. A vine that provided guides, sign posts for your actions and thoughts. But what if you began to eventually have questions or even doubts about some of those sign posts, those guides? Do you keep those questions, doubts to yourself, raise them out loud? Would you become one of those branches that is gathered up and thrown into the fire if you did? You bore no ill will. All you were seeking was answers – the truth.

The Truth. That brings us to the second part of Barbara Brown Taylors’s statement:

 …faith[defined as] openness to truth, whatever truth may turn out
 to be.

Whatever truth may turn out to be - Whatever truth may turn out to be. That brings up the question, what is “Truth” and how does one go about seeking it? That’s certainly not a new question.

Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu and the famous leader for the independence of India and a practioner of nonviolent activism, was guided his entire adult life by the quest for the truth. Why? He explains in his autobiography, and I quote “…the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God.” He went on to say, “There are innumerable definitions of God because His manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a moment stun me. I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him.”

“Truth”, itself in the English language is easy to define. According to Merriam Webster “Truth” is defined as

 A *noun*

: the real facts about something : the things that are true
: the quality or state of being true
: a statement or idea that is true or accepted as true

Truth may be easy to define, but unlike the Supreme Court’s take on pornography, truth may be difficult to recognize. That is, will we know the truth when we see it?

Let’s look at some examples of truth - the real facts in the realm of science.

Everybody knows that science is “knowledge about or study of the natural world based on facts learned through experiments and observation. And, that’s also the dictionary definition – “…based on facts….”

Once on a time not so long ago it was understood as a fact, as the truth that

* The sun revolves around the earth. Now we know the reverse is true
* The earth is flat and you could sail off the edge. Now we routinely sail, fly and orbit around the earth.
* Atoms cannot be destroyed or changed into other atoms. Now we have nuclear energy, radioactive cancer treatments, atomic bombs and negotiations to try to limit who can make and have them.

On an even more personal note:

When you were a young child you may have been led to believe by your playmates, to know, as fact, and you believed it to be the truth that if you stepped on a crack you would break your mother’s back, so you went around judiciously avoiding every crack in the sidewalk until one day you accidently stepped on crack and were horrified. You may have even cried because you knew you had just broken your mother’s, back. Ultimately you were overwhelmingly relieved and joyous to find that your mothers back was not broken. So you immediately went out and went up and down the sidewalk stomping on every crack. You knew that what you had once believed as truth was not.

Today our Bible lesson from John relates one of the seven “I am” statements the author of John attributes to Jesus.

**John 15:1-8**

Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

When we read these words we do not take them literally. We know, for example, that Jesus is not a vine. We know that we are not actual branches and, we know that God is not busy going up and down the rows of a vineyard pruning branches off the Jesus vine and all the other vines in the vineyard. We take these words in John as metaphor – figurative language, language that draws pictures, relationships in our mind. And, while some may believe as truth that Jesus actually said these words since they appear in quotation marks in the Bible, most modern biblical scholars doubt it, for many reasons. In fact most scholars doubt that the apostle John is the author of the John gospel. All seven of the “I am” statements of Jesus, like the “I am the vine” statement in today’s passage are found in John and are thought to reflect, in metaphoric language, the prevailing truth – the understanding, the beliefs about God, Jesus, and the overarching relationships to believers that prevailed among the church at the end of the first century AD when the writing of the Gospel of John is thought to have been completed.

What can we take from this Gospel passage today? First of all we take it in the context of the entire Bible, not in isolation. We also interpret it in light of how we understand the natural world and how it works. We add to this our understanding of how and when the different elements of the Bible were formed and came together. And finally each of us looks at the words of this passage and interprets the pictures they draw through the filters of our own individual experiences –whether they be few are varied.

Today, I take from this passage, in summary among other things, that the body of believers, the branches, including those of us assembled here this morning, are spiritually connected to Jesus and to one another and, as in a vine, to all others of like faith. That our best fruits come not from our own doing, not from pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps but from what we derive from this special relationship – the truth that we are all one, that we are part of this special vine that God tends with loving care.

Are there other truths yet to be discovered in this “I am the vine” passage that speak to your heart, that move your feet?

The vine metaphor is quite a fitting symbol for our relationship to God, to Christ, and to our understanding of this sacred truth. For a vine, properly pruned and cared for, can live for no one knows how long as it is continually renewed. Likewise, so too can this sacred relationship flourish as we continue to grow our understanding of it as we seek the truths, whatever they may be, of our faith.

May our faith reflect the truth of God’s love as we grow together in the love that sustains us and in the fruit that we bear.

Amen