

We Know It's True, But Is It Real?

It is really, really, really good to be back with you this morning; I feel like I've been away for a long time. I had been warned that the Pastor's of Excellence Retreat I was going off to the last Sunday I was here, could be very emotionally draining and spiritually stretching. For that reason we were encouraged to schedule some extra time after the retreat to process the experience. That's why I asked Matt to preach last Sunday--just to give me time to think and pray without needing to write a sermon or organize a service.

I had also planned to visit the Hollidaysburg Church of God and to encourage Roger and Yvonne Templeton as they have begun their ministry there. I had no inkling that last Sunday I would be home sick in bed, or that I would be out of the office and basically out of commission for a week and a half. "Bronchitis with a little bit of pneumonia" is how the doctor described it, and if it was just "a little bit," I'm certainly never going to volunteer for a "lot of it!" Thank you for your prayers, calls, and good wishes which, along with a stiff antibiotic, have helped me recover. I'm looking forward to getting back on schedule this week.

This is not to say that I was ever out of God's schedule. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I'm certain that my illness was all a part of His plan. One of the things the leader of our retreat at Ashland encouraged us to do was to use our imaginations to enhance our experience of Scripture as the living Word of God. My illness gave me time to practice. When I was laying on my sofa aching all over with chills and fever, I put myself in the fetal position and thought about the Scripture about coming to Jesus as a little child. I imagined myself in the Father's hands and in the Father's embrace. As miserable as I felt, I also felt comforted, and God's care became very real in those moments.

Another thing the retreats have been stressing is the importance of community and how God desires us to find strength in our connection with Him and with fellow believers across traditional denominational and racial barriers. Monday morning I walked into the waiting room at Mainline Medical, checked in at the reception desk, and turned around to see

Pastor Paul Johnson standing there. Where he came from or what he was doing there at that exact moment I cannot say, but I was quite sure God arranged the meeting. He asked me why I was there and when I told him, he said "let me pray for you." So, right there in the middle of the waiting room, with receptionists and other patients looking on, Paul prayed for

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me out loud, and I thanked him and we embraced as brothers in the Family of God.

A third thing God was doing with my illness was strengthening you. Some of you were doing things you don't usually do, or more than you usually do, in order to compensate for my absence. God was using this thing to grow me and to grow you. We are reminded once more that God is Good all the time.

Now, just to remind you, the last time I spoke with you we were talking about the spiritual lake. Again the idea is that our spiritual life is like a lake fed by various streams. We talked about the truth stream, the spiritual life/devotional stream, and the wisdom stream. My last sermon had to do with the truth stream and I understand that Matt also took you up the truth stream last Sunday. The experiences I have just told you about growing out of my illness point us up the spiritual life and devotional stream, and we need both streams. You see, it is possible to know the truth as information, but that's not enough; we also need to know the truth in the everyday experiences of our lives.

Our leader at the retreat in Ashland spoke about this and I found it very compelling. He said something like this: There is a difference between what people hold to be true and what they experience to be real. They will affirm, for example that God is; they will say, "It is true that He is." But, unless and until they encounter God in experience, that truth is not real. It's true but it's not real. Our retreat leader made the rather troubling assessment that there are a lot of after-Christ Christians who live in a pre-Christ reality. Such Christians know that the gospel tells us that our sins are paid for and forgiven in the sacrifice of Christ; many can even tell others that this is the truth of the gospel, but for them personally it isn't real. They are imprisoned by fear and guilt rather than set free by love and forgiveness.

They will say they are saved by grace but their anxiety and actions tell a different story: There is no peace; they are still trying to prove themselves, excuse themselves, defend themselves, make up for past mistakes, earn their own ticket to the celestial city. For them, the gospel is true but it isn't real.

Now it seems to me that the big question this poses to us is this: How do we position ourselves to experience God's truth as reality? The first thing we need to do in this regard is to describe the discrepancy between the truth we affirm and the reality we experience and understand that God

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is asking to meet us in the gap.

In our Scripture lesson from Luke 5, we see a gap: Luke 5:4-6 say, "When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon answered, 'Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.' When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break."

Do you see the gap? There was a gap between what the fishermen could do on their own and what they could do with Jesus working with them. Without Jesus there was--always is--frustration, fruitlessness, futility, the sense of fishing all night and catching nothing.

How are things in your life this morning? Is your connection with Jesus Christ real and do you see His hand at work in you and through you? Are you growing to become like Him? Do you know the joy of answered prayer? Are other people drawn to Him because they can see His Spirit in you? Are you experiencing an abundance in your spiritual life or does it feel more like you've fished all night, night after night, only to catch nothing? Acknowledge the gap. **Jesus is ready to meet you in the gap.**

The first thing we need to do to position ourselves to experience God's truth as reality is to recognize the gap between where we are and where God would lead us and understand that Jesus will meet us in the gap. A second thing we need to do

to position ourselves to experience the truth of the gospel so that it becomes truly real to us is to allow God to stretch us. Notice Jesus' words to Simon in verse 4: "Put out into the deep water. . ."

I think the fishermen among us this morning will confirm this: If you want to catch really big fish you need to let down your nets or cast out your line in deep water. If you want minnows, fish in the shallows, but the trophy catches are almost always to be found in the deep.

I think most all of us here this morning understand that life in the world today is hard. We live in a world filled with violence, heartache, greed, lust, perversions of every sort. Everywhere we look there are major league challenges and major league temptations. There is deep evil all around us and we should be able to figure out that a shallow relationship with God is not the answer. We need a deep, major league,

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relationship with God if we are going to survive and thrive spiritually in this hostile environment. Lacking that, the Devil will use us for fish bait.

We need to allow Jesus to draw us out into the deep in our relationship with Him. We need to hunger and strive for more of Him. Luke 11:9 says, "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

How do we do this? We do this by making use of every means of grace available to us. We seek God in His Word and in prayer in our private, everyday, devotions. We join together to pray for one another and to study and listen to His Word together. We seek a deeper relationship with the Lord through reading the biographies and journals of the saints who have come before us, and by participating in retreats and workshops which help to increase our capacity for the Holy Spirit. And, each time we sense God calling us to come out deeper, we move in the direction of His voice. We embrace the understanding that Christians are called to move ever closer to Christ until we are transformed into His image. There is no escaping this truth: **We need deep faith for dark days.**

Once again, the first thing we need to do to position ourselves to experience God's truth as reality is to recognize the gap between where we are and where God would lead us and understand that Jesus will meet us in the gap. And, a second thing we need to experience God's truth as reality, is to allow God to stretch us, to respond to His command to go deeper.

A third thing I see in our Scripture passage that we need, in order to experience truth as reality, is a life-changing, life-transforming, encounter with the Living God. Luke 5:8-9 say, "But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken."

It's not enough to go deeper. The quest is to meet God in the depths. Of course this is not something we can dictate. God will show up when He decides to show up, and He will reveal Himself whenever and to whomever He decides. But that does not mean we do nothing. As we seek a deeper relationship with Him through every means available to us, we position ourselves for genuine encounters with the Holy One. Such encounters will show us the depth of our sin and the

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depth of His forgiveness and will propel us into the ministries God has created us to embrace. The end of verse 10 says, "Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.'" **Real encounters with the Living God transform our lives.**

I believe that God wants us to strive for a more real, deeper, and more life-transforming relationship with Jesus Christ, a spiritual quest that is not complete until we are completely His. Notice Luke 5:11: "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him."

I saw something about myself on this past retreat at Ashland that was hard to face. We were given an assignment to ask Jesus to show us any sin in our lives that was blocking us from making progress on our spiritual journeys. We were told to ask Jesus to bring something to mind and then we were to go outside and find some object that would stand as a symbol of that sin.

I prayed the prayer but nothing came to the surface, so I reversed the assignment. I asked the Lord to show me an object that would help me to see my sin. I guess that's what He wanted me to do, because as soon as I walked out the door of our meeting place my eyes were drawn to a small forked stick on the ground. I sort of chuckled and wanted to say to the Lord, "no this is too easy, this can't be it." I took another step or two and there was another forked stick about 4 times bigger than the first one, but very similar. This time I laughed out loud and picked up the sticks.

Then I asked Jesus, "What do these sticks mean?" I didn't like what I sensed Him saying, He said, "You have a divided heart. You love me but you also love the applause of men, and that is getting in the way of your ministry. I would have your whole heart." Luke says, "They left everything and followed Him."

The truth of God's Word becomes real when we surrender to its call upon our lives. What do you need to surrender to the Lord today?

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**We Know It's True,
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Luke 5:1-11

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