



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 9, 2020
ISAIAH 58:1-9; PSALM 112:1-10; 1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-16; MATTHEW 5:13-20

CERTITUDE IS THE ENEMY OF TRUTH

Matthew 5:13-20 [Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”]

There is a Chinese proverb that says: *To be uncertain is to be uncomfortable; to be certain is to be ridiculous.*

I have found myself thinking a lot about certainty of late, or certitude, as I have framed it. The proposition I have been chewing on, especially in light of recent events in our nation and across the world, and against this cathedral, with so much anger and absolute

certainty of one's position as right and the other who disagrees is absolutely wrong—the proposition I have been pondering is this: That certitude is the enemy of truth, and if the truth will set us free, as scripture says, then certitude, as the enemy of truth, will lead to a stifled existence in the small prison cell of one's right-ness. It is a lonely place to live. A desolating sacrilege of the gift of life that God intended for us.

This is not a partisan statement, nor is it applicable to only the current era. I am mourning the way our nation's leaders have conducted themselves of late, but I am speaking of the human condition here, and the impulse to want to be right.

I fear we are rapidly losing the skill of conversing with someone with whom we disagree. That the need to be right has become a barrier to civil discourse, rendering us captives of echo-chambers designed to reinforce certitude.

Some have suggested that Maslow's hierarchy of needs lacks an important element—that along with the basic need for food, safety and intimacy is a deeply seated personal need to be right.

Young children operate naturally in this space, and must learn the art of acknowledging they might be wrong, and make amends for their error. Left unresolved, or un-matured, one will cling tightly to the need to be right, even at the expense of the relationship with the other.

Every war, every religious schism, every estrangement in a family system can be traced in some way to a root cause that involves the need to be right.

And so I say to you: Certitude is the enemy of truth, and if the truth will set us free, then certitude will surely stifle the potential for

life-giving relationship and the opportunity to be our truest selves.

One of the best books I've read in recent years is Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Lila*. Taken with its wisdom, I asked the other clergy to read it, too, that we might reflect on it together and glean its pearls of truth about life and the ways we might plumb that wisdom for our ministries here. I'd commend it to anyone really.

It is a brilliant book that weaves together a gentle love story with the experience of excruciating loss, and the haunting power of shame, and the slow truth of growing old, and, binds these threads and themes together to render a masterful consideration: that one who loves must, in some profound way, let go of certitude about everything, and yield to the astonishing prospect that another might love us for who we are, broken as we may be, and in the experience of mutuality both are set free to be true to themselves and the other.

This truth is the heart of our religious tradition—that God loves us as we are, and when we trust that, and yield to it, our hearts melt into the uncertain realm of our truest selves, capable of loving and being loved.

Marilynne Robinson once wrote: "There is something about certainty that makes Christianity unchristian." She suggests that our work is to cultivate a sense of uncertainty as a form of reverence.¹ In reverence, there is an innate orienting to the other, a longing to be in relationship, a reverence for the

relationship, as the proving ground for an abiding love to flourish.

This is the beautiful truth that Jesus is espousing when he offers a cautionary word about the law, and how he has come to fulfill the law, not abolish it. We can go down any number of rabbit holes chasing ancient elements of the law with its purity codes and food laws and quickly conclude that, if Jesus is saying we must adhere to all that, then we want none of this, this Christian way and life.

Jesus was a faithful Jew, adherent to the law, not as the source code for certitude, or the proof text for being right, but as a guide into how to be in right relationship—with God, with ourselves, with others, and with all creation. Love God, and love neighbor as yourself. That's how he summarized it. That's the key to the test of life.

His beef was not with the law, but with how the religious leaders of his day were using it to foment an air of certitude by which they decided who was in and who was out. And Jesus seemed much more inclined to heal a person on the Sabbath, or eat with tax collectors, or talk with a disreputable woman at a well about living water, than to be constrained by legalisms declaring moral certitude.

We are not tethered to the details of the law as people were in Jesus' setting, so how do we frame this directive in the context of our lives today? Well, surely we can say we, as people of faith, long to be in right

relationship, right? Or do we? That's a question Jesus is asking of us. How do we dwell in the realm of relationship rather than rightness? How do we do this, this Christian way and life?

For starters, I might suggest that Christianity is not a cause; it is a way of life, a way of being, which necessarily involves loving ourselves and others into the uncertain realm of relationship. What does that look like to you, especially when you think the other person is wrong?

When I say Christianity is not a cause, let me be clear—this faith and following Jesus may very well lead us to engage certain causes in the course of our lives, because we cannot make sense of life without doing so. I would even say we must engage some causes if we are to be faithful, which is why we have the thirteen theses of the Renewing our Covenant statement posted on the cathedral's front doors. Here we stand; we can do no other, if we are to follow Jesus and proclaim his good news by word and example in this community and in our lives out there.

But the cause is not the point; being right or certain about a cause is not the point; it is the relationship that is put right again, restored to its fullness as a result of the work. That is the point. And Jesus is saying, don't take the bait to render evil for evil; go to that deeper place where your true self dwells. There you will find the truth that will set you free.

You are salt of the earth. Be salty!

You are the light of the world. Be the light!

Jesus is saying to you and to me, just be true—true to yourself, true to the God who created you to be salt and light, flavoring and enlightening the world with the love you have to share with it.

If you do, it will be an imminently more delightful world for all to share. A transformed world in which your true self will shine as a gift, salted with meaning as one created by God for such a time as this.

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/publisher/cultivating-uncertainty>