

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

5/30/10

Living By The Truth

John 16:13

Preparing for the 175th anniversary of this congregation over the past several months has opened my eyes to an aspect of its history that I had never noticed before. I now understand that the five years that followed the founding of this church in 1835 was a fearful time. The facts show that this newly minted anti-slavery church lived under the threat of violence from a community that was hostile to its goals.

A sequence of events in 1837 demonstrates how real the threat was.¹ In October ten men of this very small church traveled to Alton, Illinois to join with Elijah Parish Lovejoy in forming the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society. In so doing they signed a public document which could make them targets of pro-slavery radicals. The next month the strength pro-slavery feeling in Springfield was in evidence as a mob gathered at the courthouse for the purpose of preventing an abolitionist sermon from being preached by a visiting minister. Because Elijah Lovejoy and other members of the Presbyterian synod were in town the anti-slavery people had the manpower to deter the mob of local people. But when Lovejoy and the other Presbyterian delegates left town the pro-slavery majority of the community was firmly in control. The angry citizens of Springfield called a meeting where they passed resolutions labeling abolitionists as unchristian and a danger to society.²

The new anti-slavery church had been put on notice that they had better not go too far because a vigilant community was watching and was ready to take action against them. Three weeks later Lovejoy was murdered while trying to protect his printing press in Alton. That act of violence would have been understood by Lovejoy's friends at Second Presbyterian as an example of what could happen to them if they became too aggressive in expressing their views. A year and a half after the death of Lovejoy, Dewey Whitney ended his three-year pastorate because of failing health. He left the ministry and moved far away from Illinois. I can now see that the stress of leading a newly formed church which was living under the threat of violence undoubtedly contributed to the health problems he was experiencing.

In the 16th chapter of John the gospel writer addresses what it means to live under threat. John is writing to a newly created church which is experiencing persecution from a hostile society. In this chapter Jesus warns his followers that they will be ejected from the synagogues where they have always worshiped. Worse yet, people will try to kill them in the belief that they are doing the work of God. John wants his people to know that even if the worst happens God will provide them with the resources to deal with it. They can survive any threat as long as they stay connected to the truth of God. John writes, "When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth... (John 16:13)."

In John's gospel truth is not about expressing logical consistency, or proving facts, or uncovering overwhelming evidence. For John to live by the truth means to be in touch with God's goodness, reliability, and steadfastness. We are led into the truth not so we can make stronger arguments than our opponents. We are led into God's truth so that we may be steady in turbulent times.³

It was a form of turbulence that buffeted our 175th Anniversary Dinner on May 26. A sudden storm knocked out power to the church at 3:30 p.m. as the dinner was being cooked. The power was not restored until 8:00 p.m. In an amazing display of steadiness food was transported to homes that had power. Tables in the Parish Hall were decked out with candles and the program was reshuffled. Almost everyone who registered came in spite of flooded basements and flooded streets. They enjoyed a wonderful dinner served hot though slightly late while patiently enduring the heat the way people would have in 1835. The capacity to adjust and enjoy testifies to the equilibrium of this community of faith.

In much the same way the Trinity demonstrates the equilibrium of God's relationship to creation. God the Creator is always beyond us as stated in Psalm 8. But God is present with us in the person of Jesus Christ. The Spirit is at work to keep us connected to God's reliable and loving presence. In the midst of everything that would push us into chaos we can live with steady equilibrium because we are embraced by the equilibrium of the Trinity. This is the truth into which the Spirit is leading us.

Living by this truth was at the heart of Albert Hale's ministry at this church which began in 1839. Hale came to a congregation that was struggling to find its equilibrium after four years of living under threat. Last Sunday, I introduced you to a sermon of Albert Hale which demonstrates his uncompromising commitment to social justice and his courage in addressing the most controversial issues of his day. But those who knew him were quick to point out that his courageous preaching was not his greatest contribution to the congregation he served. More important was the fact that his pastoral style put his people in touch with the steadiness of God when they needed it most.

This side of Albert Hale was described by D. S. Johnson in the sermon he preached at Hale's funeral in 1891. When Johnson preached this sermon he had been pastor of this church for ten years and he knew Hale very well. This is what he said:

Another remarkable quality in the character of Father Hale was his uniform serenity. Fully alive at the moral bearing of all passing events, jealous of the cause of right and zealous for the triumph of those principles, he could not but be deeply affected by the sin, and injustice and crime which he saw around him.

He was also ...in soulful sympathy with all who suffered wrongs of whatever sort. Nevertheless, the inward struggle and pain which these things caused him, were not apparent on the surface. He was always calm on the outside—never indulging in violent counter-blasts in hasty and ill-considered action, or in outbursts of passion...

Amid the lesser but sometimes more vexatious provocations of private life this serenity of spirit shone as a soft and mellow halo over the domain of his home, and the circle of his friends. You know what I mean, you who often met him in the home, or by the way. How he brightened your heart, as you looked into the face. It had the light and the warmth of the sun in it. Nay, the light and cheer and healing of the sun of righteousness.⁴

To a people living under threat Albert Hale brought the Spirit who guides us into all the truth. He helped them find their way to the equilibrium of God. That equilibrium continues to shape this dynamic community of faith.

Endnotes

1. For a more detailed description of these events see my sermon, "Covenant of Grace," 25 April 2010.
2. I am indebted to Bayard Catron for bringing this gathering to my attention.
3. This understanding of John's concept of truth follows the interpretation of Hans Mol in *Calvin For the Third Millennium*, pages 5-9.
4. D. S. Johnson, "Funeral Sermon For Albert Hale," at Second Presbyterian Church, 1 February 1891.