

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost • August 24, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

John 1:43-51

“Portraits of Faith – Bartholomew: No Deceit”

Our “Portraits of Faith” series has taken us all over Scripture this summer, back and forth from Old Testament to New Testament, connecting the lives of those who have gone before us in the faith to those living in it today. Last week, we got to think about waiting and going barefoot. This week, we hear about truth – and Bigfoot. In case you had not heard about this, a couple of weeks ago the “news of the weird” circuit started to light up with reports of two Georgia men who claimed to have discovered the remains of a Bigfoot creature while hiking in the woods. The men took the seven-foot-plus body back home, where they placed it in a 1,500-pound cooler of ice to preserve it, then went out to tell their story. They became connected with a man who is apparently something of a Bigfoot promoter, and this man arranged for a full-scale press conference to be held in Palo Alto, California, to share this discovery with the world, to tell the truth about an amazing thing: Bigfoot had been found, at long last! The men told their story (though no body was presented) and promised that scientific experts would soon be able to speak the truth the tale. In the day or so following the press conference, new information came to light. It seems that the promoter had his own investigator inspecting the ice-encased remains, which had been turned over by the self-described “Bigfoot trackers” and sent up to Indiana. The promoter, not content to wait for the body to thaw, instructed his investigator to heat things up to speed the process along. The investigator observed the body as he waited for it to thaw enough for a physical inspection. At long last, a break in the ice appeared around its base. The investigator, noting that something didn’t look quite right with Bigfoot’s foot, reached in to verify his suspicion... and confirmed it was made out of rubber! The promoter, who apparently paid the two discoverers an advance of around \$50,000, called the men at their California hotel, at which point they admitted that their “discovery” was, in fact, a hoax. By the time the promoter got over to the hotel to sort things out, however, the men had – like Bigfoot in the woods – disappeared. This past week, the men resurfaced in Georgia, telling reporters that this had all started out as a big joke and that they never meant things to go as far as they did; however, some folks aren’t laughing. It turns out that one of the two tricksters was actually an officer with the Clayton County Police Department. Hearing the news of the hoax, his boss, the Chief of Police, took action to fire the now ex-officer. In an interview, the police chief said, “A defense attorney could put him on the stand and say, ‘You lied about this — how do we know you’re not lying now?’ A police officer needs credibility and honor.”

In today’s reading, we hear of another legendary creature – a man in whom there is no deceit. If you’ve read the title of today’s message, you might have already gone looking for Bartholomew in our text from John 1, only to have about as much success as a Georgia Bigfoot tracker. We hear about Philip, Nathanael, and Jesus. Andrew, Simon Peter, and John the Baptizer show up in the verses right before this, but where’s Bartholomew? While we don’t have definitive proof, we can be fairly certain that Bartholomew and Nathanael are alternate names for the same man – as in “Nathanael, son of Tholomaeus.” In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), Bartholomew is named as one of the Twelve Apostles. In John’s account, he refers to this twelfth disciple as “Nathanael.” (So when you see me writing about Nathanael, please understand that I’m referring to the same man.)

Jesus finds Philip at the beginning of today’s reading and calls Philip to follow him. Philip then goes to find Nathanael, sharing the truth about an amazing thing: this guy from Nazareth is the one that the Scriptures promised, the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote! At this point, we get our first glimpse of Nathanael’s character: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (By way of explanation, it may help to know that people from Judah, the region in the south of Israel around Jerusalem, viewed the people up in the northern region Galilee as country bumpkins. Nathanael, we learn later, came from Cana in Galilee – he was himself a Galilean – so for him to say this about Nazareth tells us a bit about what kind of opinion people had about the little town where Jesus grew up.) Nathanael apparently tells

it like it is. Charitably, we might call him a “straight shooter:” he is honest in his speech. Philip, however, responds to his friend’s questioning observation, calling him to “Come and see.” And so he does.

When these two men come near to where Philip made his discovery, Nathanael hears a stranger say about him, “Truly, an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” An odd statement, especially considering that Philip has yet to make introductions. But Jesus knows the heart of every man and woman, and his statement resonates with Nathanael. Jesus knows that this man has come without a hidden agenda. Nathanael has come to investigate, to see for himself if his doubts about Philip’s claim are justified. Instead, Jesus demonstrates his supernatural knowledge by simply telling the man that he’d been sitting under a fig tree before Philip even called to him. All at once, the reality of just Who Jesus is hits Nathanael, and he responds with another tells-it-like-it-is statement: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Nathanael tells the truth about an amazing thing.

What might we make of Nathanael’s example of truth-speaking today? In a world of political spin doctors and “reality” TV, isn’t it fair to say that our relationship with truth is, at best, complicated? We expect the truth from other people: lying and deceit are pretty universally looked down upon. But when others expect the truth from us, sometimes the truth can become, well... *inconvenient*. When those times come, isn’t it easier just to offer up a half-truth? Give the people a little truth, but not too much, right? Consider Bobby’s situation: he wants to spend the night over at his best friend’s house, so he goes to ask permission from his mom. She asks Bobby, “I don’t know – you’ve got some chores left to do. What did your father say?” “Oh, he didn’t have a problem with it.” Problem is, Bobby never actually *asked* his dad for permission. Beyond the half-truth is the so-called “white lie” or fib, deliberately intended to deceive people, if only about a little thing. But neither a “white lie” nor a half-truth is the whole truth – anything short of the whole truth is a deception.

Deceit does not come from God, but from the devil, the father of lies. And truth be told, the devil is not some mythological creature. We feel his influence all around us, certainly in those times when it would just seem so much easier to tell something less than the truth. If you’ve ever been asked, “What do you think of my dessert?” or “Isn’t my new grandbaby beautiful?” or even “Does this make me look fat?” and found yourself at a loss for words, you know that being honest is sometimes difficult! That said, though, the devil and the world around you honestly intend to make a liar out of you – and they don’t have to work all that hard to see that happen. According to an after-the-fact interview, the Bigfoot hoaxers said that they just sort of got carried along as their story just started to take off on its own, even while keeping up pretenses at a national press conference. *We* deceive ourselves on an ongoing basis when we think that we can do fine ignoring God’s instruction and going our own way. As John writes in the first of his epistles, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

As Christians, we are called to speak the truth in love. Nathanael may have been a “straight shooter,” but he possibly lacked tact. That “in love” clause of “speak the truth in love” is pretty important: we tell the truth to build up, not to harm – even though telling the truth may sometimes hurt. In 1 John, the evangelist also wrote, “If we confess our sins, [Jesus] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Confessing our sin, telling the truth to God and to the people we have deceived, we can find healing in the cross of Christ, where he did one of the “greater things” he spoke of to Nathanael: winning forgiveness to all who have feared the truth.

Christians don’t often get to hold press conferences about the Good News that we have to share with the world. Even so, we are sent to speak the truth in love in every situation. We go to tell the truth about an amazing thing: the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Amen.