

TELLING THE TRUTH

CELEBRATION OF NEW MINISTRY

The Rev. Amy Richter – St. Anne's, Annapolis

When I was rector of the other St. Anne's, I was visited one morning by a parishioner who wanted to discuss the forum of the past Sunday on human sexuality. He admitted that he was probably more conservative than most, although the opinions in the church were full range. But he then moved to discuss how stressful it was being married and raising children. He was a prominent Atlanta attorney and talked about how law firms in Atlanta were more and more national firms and this meant more and more travel. I listened as he went over a number of things and then he said; "What I guess I really want from the church is the truth. I want to know what is true." I do not think I gave him a very good answer. But his question is the reason why we are here today. It is the reason that we are celebrating this new ministry. We are here to tell the truth. We are here to tell the truth about ourselves and most importantly, the truth about God.

Some may say; "Oh I can't do that. This is presumptuous and self-righteous." Amy may be saying; "I am not sure I bargained for this when I accepted the call to St. Anne's." Yet we are here in order to celebrate what we are called to do as church – to proclaim the truth which is not ours but God's. There is a broken and contrite world hungry for hope, hungry for meaning, hungry for understanding and hungry for compassion. And all of these come to us when we tell the truth about ourselves and the truth about God.

Confident in your new rector being an excellent theologian, teacher and preacher as well as you, the people of St. Anne's, being a thoughtful, faithful and deeply seeking people that such a charge as telling the truth is not off the mark! We do all, as Paul tells us, see in the "mirror dimly." For it is not our truth, but that of God.

So how do we find it? First of all it is the Story, and we are a people of the Story. We are called to live into the Story that is God's salvation. You are blessed having a rector who is a biblical scholar and who can tell the story! My own expression is that we need to read the Bible from "the inside out." But too often we stand off and look at the story and when it makes sense we follow, or if it does not we ignore or reject it. The Bible is full of mystery, paradox and, yes, even contradiction. And we are called to live into all of that and like Jacob wrestle with it! The two great sins of Biblical studies are literalism and relativism. Both seek to be totally rational and see things making sense – sense from our perspective. And both miss the heart and soul of the Story; we must enter into it and make it our own. For example, one of the great stories that speak to the truth about us is Jonah. How we sulk when we do not get our way and how we do not want to do what God demands. I preached once noting that the truth has nothing to do with the literalism of Jonah being swallowed by a whale. Someone brought me a picture of a blue whale and said the dimensions being such that a grown person could stand up in the belly. Both the literalist trying to explain the whale and the relativist who sees an unrealistic account of a person being swallowed by a whale and vomited up on the shore miss the point!

Truth emerges as we live into the Story, as we seek to understand it is our story. I know over and over that I identify with Peter and with Ananias who both have to struggle with Paul and the Hellenists and all the changes they want! I want to say, as a life long Episcopalian and Anglican; "Hey what are you doing to my church?" But the truth is that the church needs **both** Peter and Paul!

The second way we find truth is to take upon ourselves the fullness of discipleship. Sadly, in our quest to add to the rolls, we seem to think it appropriate to simply minimize the demands of the Gospel. Only by fully carrying the cross, as Jesus demands, can we fully understand the grace, mercy and love God has for us. I recall in 1996 when I was invited to join the Atlanta Rotary how no one apologized for telling me, in effect, where I would eat lunch every Tuesday for the rest of my life! But watch us run the other way if we think we might have to speak to a newcomer about tithing! I told my younger daughter that perhaps the motto for her school would be a good mission statement for churches: "No short cuts and no excuses!" Isn't it interesting that throughout the gospel when challenged on what one must do for salvation Jesus never gives us a second choice? And much less a third or fourth choice! So why do we persist in making it a minimal commitment? One area, dear to the heart of your rector, where we need to do the hard work of discipleship is in our formation – lifetime formation. We never learn fully or fully understand the wonderment of God and God's salvation. With a great teacher like Amy and with what I know to be a congregation full of thoughtful and faithful people, I hope that St. Anne's will be a place of lifelong formation – asking the hard questions, stretching in your faith and working out of hope and not fear. You cannot carry your cross if you do not know where you are going! So may you not take "short-cuts," or make excuses when it comes to formation. St. Anne's you are a wonderful and gifted community of faith. Amy Richter you are a most gifted teacher and preacher. Together you will seek and you will proclaim the truth. Not self-righteously, not arrogantly. You will do it because your will not be afraid to tell the Story, to live into the story and to even wrestle with the Story. You will do it because you will do the necessary, and hard, work of discipleship.

I am most confident in all of this. God bless you Amy, and God bless you St. Anne's. Amen.