

The Voice of Truth
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

—it is an honor

—the love I have in my heart for this place and for this congregation is just immense.

—Especially for the youth of the church. Each one of you are a special gift to me from God. Your spirit, your creativity, your thoughtfulness, your love will change this world. It has certainly changed me. The times we have shared, in all of their craziness, will stay in my heart and I will ponder them from time to time for the rest of my life.

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be Still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith? And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

About five years ago, when I was 18 years old things felt surreal as I packed up my bedroom and prepared to leave home in Ona, WV for Shepherd University. I sat in my empty room and felt sad. As I drove away and saw my father waving good bye in the mirror, I cried like a baby. Those who know me will tell you, I do not cry very often. I was leaving Ona and crossing the other side of the lake to Shepherdstown.

Recently, things felt surreal as I packed up my little cabin on the Pritchard's farm just outside of town and prepared to leave home in Shepherdstown for Indiana. I sat in my empty home and felt sad. As I drive away from Shepherdstown today, I will no doubt have tears in my eyes. I am leaving Shepherdstown and crossing over to the other side of the lake in Bloomington, Indiana to attend graduate school.

I grew up in the Presbyterian Church. I am very loyal to and proud of PCUSA. So I knew when I came to Shepherdstown I wanted to find a Presbyterian congregation to become a part of. That brought me here one Sunday morning in August. I was fresh faced (most people pegged me at age 16), a little bit scared, and not yet comfortable with Shepherdstown. I remember sitting alone in my dorm the first day of classes and plotting my withdrawal from Shepherd and my return home to attend Marshall University. Some people say they feel immediately comfortable in this church. They say they are overjoyed to find such a progressive place. That was not the case for me. The truth is, this church, and you the congregation, stretch me. You did then, you do now. You make me uncomfortable sometimes; you force me to ask hard questions and back up what I believe. You call on me to put up or shut up. But I also felt something very special here. I had the feeling this was a Holy Spirit led people. Sometimes we have to go on just that, our gut, our feelings. Or, you just might say, we have to go on what the voice of truth tells us.

That first Sunday, I was very intrigued by Randy's sermon. I had some questions I wanted to ask so I looked up his office hours, rode my bike from the dorms to the church, and sat down on

the couch in his office for what ended up being over an hour long conversation. This would be the first of many such conversations with Randy and I cannot say how profound his impact on my life has been. He is my friend, my pastor, and my mentor. I've had many conversations like that with so many of you from the congregation. I'm thankful for them all. Never before have I met so many fascinating people with such interesting stories in one place. If God is the potter and I am the clay, then I can honestly say the potter has shaped me through conversation with fascinating, thoughtful, prayerful people like all of you.

After that initial conversation I told Randy I would be happy to help out around the church however I could. That gave Randy an idea. There was a youth leader position open and he thought maybe I would be a good fit. He pitched his idea to the youth education committee and before you know it, there I was in an interview. Now, all of this should give you reason to pause. Keep in mind, all Randy knew of me he knew from one conversation. All the youth education committee really knew of me was one interview. I was 18, but I looked like I was 16. I had no experience in this field, though I did have a job in high school as a janitor at my Presbyterian church back home.

Interestingly, I had shared a prayer with God the summer before college and declared I was willing to serve in the church however I could. I wanted to be a servant. But, I told the Lord, but, but, but the one thing I do not see myself doing and the one thing I do not want to do is youth ministry. I simply did not think I was cool enough for it, creative enough for it, organized enough for it, or just plain cut out for it at all. Of course, my college career would be defined by youth ministry both here and through a program I am deeply involved in called Young Life. Youth ministry has been the defining blessing of my life for five years now. Isn't that just how God works?

I believe it was God's voice of truth that led me to this place and convinced me to change my mind about youth ministry. The voice of truth inspired Randy, the youth education committee and you the congregation to take a chance on me. The blessings which evolved for me from that chance have been the defining experience of my time in Shepherdstown. The blessings which evolved for me from that chance have been profound, transformative, and holy. The youth and I have grown together. I have been loved and supported and cared for by everyone here. I know God more because of my time with you. Together, you and I have listened for the voice of truth and I am convinced we have heard it loud and clear.

Truth is a powerful, powerful word. People have killed in the name of truth. People have done radical, history changing acts of love in the name of truth. It's what we're all after is it not? It's what brings us to a place like church. We yearn, we ache for truth. That there is a voice speaking to us, telling us the *truth* (Truth with a capital T) is something to praise and to be thankful for. So, let me offer my definition of the voice of truth. It is of God, it is made human to us through Christ, it is made understandable to us through the Holy Spirit. The voice of truth is eternal, and it is never wrong. It is often felt in your gut, in your feelings. The voice of truth is always spoken in, of, and through love. If it is not spoken in, of, and through love then it is not the word of God and thus, not the truth. Of course, often tough love is in order too.

Quickly, I want to clarify something. Distinguish the idea of truth from right and wrong. Often what is right or wrong is not eternal and is not clear at all. For example, in a dispute, the right way to handle the dispute may not be clear. Who's right in the dispute may not be clear. But that complete honesty, integrity, respect, humility, and love are necessary is the undeniable truth. On a given political issue, the line between right and wrong may be very, very gray, but the *truth* of the matter is that the best interest of the lives at stake, and most importantly justice, must be the end goal. This is not to say the voice of truth always wins out, just that it is always present.

In our gospel lesson today, it is Jesus' voice of truth that calms the storm. But before any calming happens notice the dynamics of this little journey: *And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them.* In our journey, we are called to walk with Jesus. But for this to happen, we must first invite Jesus to walk with us, or in this instance to ride in the boat with us. Notice also that Jesus does not drive the boat, we do. Jesus is our companion. Also, take note of this: *Other boats were with him.* Let's be honest, most of us are inclined, in general, to play it safe when it comes to spiritual development. Intimacy, not Sunday morning attendance, but intimacy with God is a rare, rare thing to see and to experience. We're willing to go to the shore, or maybe even to take another boat out and watch from afar, but to be **in** the boat? Nah, that means a little too much self reflection and a little too much prayer. It means more Bible and faith talk than we're willing to get into. It means more commitment than we're willing to give. I include myself in this category entirely. But ability to hear truth takes a true commitment to the source of truth.

Our story continues, a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was asleep in the stern; and they woke him and said, "teacher do you not care that we are perishing?" Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!'" Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm.

Only those who are *in the boat with Jesus* actually hear the voice of truth. The other boats no doubt benefitted because they were in a storm and now they're not, but as far as they can tell they were in a storm, it was bad, it ended. ONLY THE ONES WHO INVITED JESUS TO RIDE WITH THEM, ACTUALLY KNOW WHY THE STORM HAS STOPPED. ONLY THEY ACTUALLY HEARD THE VOICE OF TRUTH. Watching from afar and not having the courage to ride with Jesus, prevents us from really hearing the voice the truth.

The voice of truth is not hard to hear, we are simply hard of hearing. To hear clearly, we must cleanse ourselves of all the noise in our lives. Not to do so would be like trying to have a conversation with someone after sitting front row at a Rolling Stones concert. You just wouldn't be able to do it for all the ringing in your ears. We must be intentional about creating time and space to listen for God.

Also, to hear we must first confess all the damage we have done because of not hearing. I believe that of all the elements of our Sunday services none is more important than our prayer of confession. That's why it comes so early in the service. For me personally, nothing has been more important to me spiritually than confession. The truth is that I have had thoughts and I have taken actions that I would be ashamed to share with you, but miraculously God is willing to bear those burdens with me.

Sin is real, and we must deal with it if we are to hear God. For just as there is truth, there are lies that pull us further and further away from who we are meant to be. Lies that tell us we're better than someone else, or that we deserve riches, that we need more and more and more. Lies make us complacent with and a part of injustice. Lies make us hurt one another. Then there are lies that make us hurt ourselves and maybe even hate ourselves. These lies tell us we do not matter, or that we are ugly, or that we're stupid. Lies, lies, lies.

Eventually, *we* must *be* the voice of truth. We must accept the truth, deny the lies and take up our call. This is how meaning is found and true love is achieved. We must return to who we really are. That phrase may strike you as odd, to be who we really are. But it's at the heart of what our joint quest for truth is all about. My favorite few lines of the entire Bible are from 2nd Peter chapter 1 verses 3-8. They will help me make my point:

God's divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus we are given his precious and very great promises, so

*that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become **participants in the divine nature.***

Participants in the divine nature. I believe we are all meant to be participants of the divine nature. The very word nature implies this is something inherent in all of us, it is in our nature to seek God, love God, and serve God. It's just that we forget this. Over time we deny this, just like we become incapable of hearing the voice of truth. Nothing is even more important than remembering our true nature. Now is the time to remember. At certain moments in this church, both with the youth and with all of you, I've remembered and it has been nothing short of awesome. Sitting on park benches and talking for hours talking about faith and life, studying scripture, praying together, and playing hard together we've sought after God with our hearts, minds, and souls. We've served together in the hills of Appalachia, on an Indian Reservation, in the inner city, at an apple orchard with migrant workers, and even in the halls of the United States Congress. We've listened for God's voice in the stillness of the wilderness and here in this very sanctuary. We live life together, life with all of its heartbreaks and sorrow. We strive for godliness and close relationship with the Lord, but we are always cautious of phony, public acts. Yes, we are always real with each other and my what a rare thing that is.

SPC is where people come together to listen for the voice of truth, to journey together in the boat with God, to support each other in rejecting the lies of the world, and to be participants in the divine nature. SPC is a special, special place and I thank God more than you know for my time here.

"Peace! Be Still!" And then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey?"