“***May Not Perish***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Sep. 20, 2020

**John 3:13–21**

13 “No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. . . .

19 This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20Forall who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

John is explaining to people who were not there, about the saving actions of Jesus. “Who is this Son of Man, and why is he special,” they might have asked. John tries to show how Jesus was the truth revealer, and the Son of God. I think the key to this passage is in the final sentences. It is all about the attractive power of light and truth. And the famous verse 16, about God sending the Son, also is about the drawing power of the light. Believing in Jesus is the same thing as being drawn to the light, being loyal to what is true. Those who “do what is true come to the light,” John says (3:21). Those who killed the Son of Man “loved darkness rather than light” (3:19). Salvation has to do with loving the light.

I like the fact that it says he came to save the world. Obviously, the world has not yet let itself be saved. It has not yet loved the light enough. But it will, some day. He will save the world when the human race arouses and shakes off its inclination toward falsehood, darkness, and power, and strives for truth and light. We have to stop leaning toward material possessions and focus on permanent meanings and values.

It is up to each of us to choose light or darkness. This passage draws our attention to the gravity of choice. As we choose light and truth, the repeated choosing becomes easier; it becomes our true nature. Our choice for Jesus is a choice for truth and light. What are “truth” and “light,” in our living? Truth stands for nobility of purpose, generosity of mind and heart. It means fearless and courageous pursuit of real values and enduring meanings. If you are true of heart, that means you are honest and straightforward in your living, that you have affection for kindness and decency, and that your intentions are good: you strive to be fair and just, and you are free of deceitfulness. Light implies a quality of honesty and openness, dedication to the reality of whatever is true and good. Both truth and light imply an openness to being taught by God, being guided in the right direction. And so, truth and light imply hope. If God really will guide us, then we have a basis for hope.

Truth and light encourage hope that is healthy. I am not referring to delusional or materialistic hope. As the 19th century Bishop of Durham, Brooke Foss Westcott, prayed, “May no fear or hope ever make us false in act or speech. Bring us all into the perfect freedom of your truth, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” There is freedom in God’s truth, because it frees us from delusion and self-centeredness. The hope that comes from God’s light is based on reality, although it may go against the world’s cynicism and its crushing pressures. The highest reality is God’s plan for goodness and growth for us, our families, and our world.

If we trust Jesus to guide our growth, then growth will become the plot and the program for our lives. We can see this goodness manifested in some lives. Many parents are determined to protect their children from painful experiences they had when they were young. They know what it was like to have an alcoholic father, and they are not going to inflict that on their children. Or they know what it was like to have an angry and judgmental mother, and they are determined not to act that way to their own children. These parents are loyal to an ethical vision that makes them determined not to afflict their children. Experience is a mighty teacher. The spiritual requirements for parenting are high. You seek to love your children as the heavenly Father has loved you.

I am highlighting the fact that truth is a spiritual and moral commitment, not a religious doctrine. Jesus himself always put the emphasis on spiritual and moral truth, never on doctrinal belief or orthodoxy. The “light” in Jesus’ teaching was a real spiritual light based on a living relationship with God. It was not a structure of beliefs. Can you think of truth as a living connection with the Source of Truth, rather than as a system of belief? Truth in this sense is similar to love. It is loyalty and relationship. This is the living truth that Jesus embodied in his own life. Those who love the light are those who love honesty and fairness, and who despise cruelty and larceny.

A black woman named Harriet Tubman pursued her devotion to truth her whole life. As a slave child in Maryland, she was whipped, hit in the head, and lost three sisters when their owners sold them away. She escaped from slavery and then returned many times to liberate slaves and sneak them out into the underground railroad, where most of them were taken to Canada. She felt she was doing God’s work. She served the Union army during the Civil War, freeing over 700 slaves in one of her raids. After the war, while riding on a train in New York State, she was told by a conductor to move to the baggage section. He ignored her papers that enabled her to be in the half-price section. He grabbed her, enlisting the help of passengers to manhandle her and throw her into the baggage section, breaking her arm in the process. She became well-known during her lifetime, when biographies were written about her. In her later years she became a suffragist activist. She believed she was guided by God in all her efforts.

Tubman illustrates that faith is a verb that invigorates our hope, and strengthens us to follow the Spirit. Another truth-teller was the Russian Orthodox priest Gleb Yakunin. He formed a human rights group to oppose the Soviet repression of religion, and was sent to prison. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Yakunin gained access to KGB records, and he released information about trained KGB agents who held high positions in the Russian Orthodox Church. He was excommunicated by the Orthodox Church. He remained a respected leader of the human rights movement up to his death in 2014.

Tubman and Yakunin are examples of people who stood up for human dignity and freedom. They were mistreated, but they will always be remembered. Jesus himself also ran into opposition from the priests and moneychangers, and even from his own apostles when he welcomed children to come to him. But those who are of the light will be drawn to Jesus. Tubman and Yakunin lived by faith, and they loved Jesus. We may not be as heroic or as famous as these two people, but we can stand true in our own lives. The Spirit will lead us homeward. May your life be filled with light and truth.