



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“I Am the True Vine”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

John 15: 1-11; Matthew 22: 34-40

February 28, 2016

It was just about this time, last year, that the confluence of two experiences in my life immeasurably and interminably altered my understanding of the power of perception!

The first thing (and some of you aren't going to know exactly what I am talking about) was the infamous blue and black (or white and gold) dress that made its way around the internet early last year. For those of you who don't know, it is pretty simple. There is this picture of a dress that engulfed the world of social media as it emerged last year. It is a two-toned dress with different colored horizontal piping alternating down the dress. But, the remarkable thing was that the world simply could not agree on the color of this dress. If you take a picture of this dress on your phone or computer, and you show it to a group of people, you will find that half of them are convinced that the dress is black and blue while the other half are equally as convinced that it is white and gold. And, we're not talking misnaming shades of color either – to me this dress was pure white and dark gold, to others, it is unmistakably dark blue and black.

Anyway, it turns out that this is all a result of the feed of neurons to, and from, our brain. I'm no biologist, and certainly not a neurologist, so this is really over my head, but it has something to do with the neurons that are firing from the cortex of our eyes, that is influenced by our eye's perception of the light from the surrounding environment. But this particular picture seems to fall in some perceptual chasm in our brains that causes us to see things differently. Based on the ways our individual eyes interpret the light around us, our minds will tell some of us that the dress is white and gold while others will fully see black and blue. In other words – our understanding of the 'truth' of the color this dress has far more to do with our perception of the dress than it has to do with the actual color that is there.

Now, keep that in mind – because we are going to come back to it – but this brings us to the second experience. While all of this social media hype was flying around the color of this dress, I found myself sitting for one of my final conversations, with the Search Committee, in Melissa Block's living room. And one of the people there, of course, was our own Dr. Tom Chelimsky – who is, in fact, a neurologist. Now, I'm a reasonably intelligent guy, but for those of you who

don't know Tom well, there are times my conversations with him make me feel as though I need to go back to kindergarten and just start over. So, I may botch the science of this a little, but the essence of the conversation we shared that day, in confluence of this separate swirling wind regarding this dress, changed my perception of perception, forever. In a conversation about studies regarding pain and tolerance for patients of which he was a part, Tom explained to us that there are roughly 1 million neurons serving as input to our brains at any given time. He then went on to explain that, of those million neurons, our brains can process only about 15,000 of them at any given time. In other words, of all of the information being sent towards our brains, only about 1.5% of it can actually be processed. Meanwhile, there are some 2 million neurons, at any given time, being sent from our brain to interpret the 15,000 neurons that are being received.

Now, again, I don't want to quote the science too extensively. But, from the very fundamental standpoint, do you see where this leads? For every individual neuron giving our brain information on the reality (or 'truth') around us, there are 60 others being completely ignored and over 100 'interpreting' the single neuron that came in. Or, if I can put it in other words – our interpretation of any given situation or experience is more than 100 times more powerful than the actual physical, real information our brains are receiving at any given time. Now, for Tom, this leads to dialog about phantom pain, pain control, meditation techniques, relaxation strategies, and all sorts of other things that tap into the notion of modifying our mental perception of the world. But, as I listened to him speak of the amount of influence our brain has on our perception of reality, and as I considered the endless online debates over the color of a dress, the theologian and pastor in me couldn't help but start screaming – 'And still, we spend time after time, day after day, discussion after discussion, telling the world about the 'truth' that we *know* about God!'

Think about it. We can't even tell what color a dress is. We can't be sure whether that pain we feel in our legs is actually a problem in our legs or, in fact, something wrong 3 feet higher, in our neck, that our brain is somehow attributing to our legs. But, somehow, we think we can encapsulate God, define Christ, articulate faithfulness, describe discipleship, limit salvation and in a thousand other ways specifically and unapologetically claim to know and own the truth of God. All the while, we completely ignore the thousands of interpretive filters that are shading our every understanding of that Divine mystery.

Agendas, needs, wants, fears, expectations, mindsets, prejudices, values, attitudes, beliefs, language, experience, self-image, indoctrination, upbringing, political positions...the list of filters that are shading our understanding and interpretation of the 'truth' of God are more numerous and extensive than I could ever list in this setting. And, we bring that myriad of filters to an invisible deity, who focused on engaging with humanity through heart and spirit, and who is described in a book full of allegories and metaphors that we need to interpret to try to understand. And, we are insane enough to say that we can do it! My friends – we can't even agree on whether the glass is half full or half empty. And, yet somehow we sometimes seem to think we can fully, completely, and inarguably define and articulate the truth of God.

Do you see the absurdity in that? Do you see how crazy it is to come to that Divine Mystery, with a worldview so profoundly influenced by our own filters and perception, and still claim to

be able to articulate God in clear and undeniable truths? Do you see how blatantly egotistical it is to claim that we will somehow be able to set aside all of our filters, conquer all of our perceptual blinders, and name God, define Christ and encapsulate salvation? I'm not sure there is any greater over-reach in the human condition than our assertion that we can somehow own the truth of God.

So, what do we do? If we are to accept that we cannot perfectly articulate the Divine reality – if we are to come to terms with the fact that we cannot delineate the truth of God in inarguable forms – if we are to own the truth that we will never own the truth – what do we do? Well, that's what brings us to our passage for today, because I suggest it's actually pretty simple. We remain in the vine!

“I am the vine; you are the branches,” Says Jesus. “If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit...As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.”

Here it is in a nutshell: Jesus does not seek blind obedience, theological adherence, religious dominance, or doctrinal perfection – Jesus seeks relationship with us. It really is that simple!

That's the remarkable element of our passage from Matthew. Someone asks Jesus about the greatest commandment of all, but take note of his response! “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets” Jesus says, “hang on these two commandments.”

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- Notice that, when Jesus was asked of the greatest commandment, it didn't have anything to do with actions. It didn't have anything to do with what people would do, not do, say, not say, or anything else. When Jesus was asked for the greatest commandment, he didn't get into their actions and obligations.
- Notice that, when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, it didn't have anything to do with religion. He didn't talk about going to church, attending synagogue, tithing, or serving on a committee. When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, he didn't get into their religious affiliations.
- And, notice that, when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, he didn't get into their doctrine. He didn't talk about their creeds, their statements of faith, or their articulations of the Divine truth. When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, he didn't bring up a script about what they believed.

No – when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, he told them that the greatest commandment was one of relationship. He said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” And... “Love your neighbor as yourself.” When Jesus was asked what theological expectation stood head and shoulders above the rest it wasn't doctrinal accuracy, behavioral purity or religious sanctity. No – it was relationship. Love God and love one another. Or, to put it in the words of today's “I Am” statement, ‘remain in the vine!’

It is only natural that we quest for knowledge. We want to understand things. We want to grasp what we don't grasp, we want to define that which hasn't been defined – it is human nature.

- But, the problem is that our desire to understand and define God increasingly replaces our need to know God – in our hearts and in our lives.
- The problem is that our desire to articulate the truth of God increasingly replaces our need to dwell in the presence of God.
- The problem is that faith is ever-more defined by what we do, say and believe and less and less about who and what resides in our hearts.

And, the problem with all of that, is that Jesus does not seek blind obedience, theological adherence, religious dominance, or doctrinal perfection – Jesus seeks relationship with us.

It is absolutely mind-numbing when we start to truly consider the absurdity of our claim to be able to define God. The simple truth is that no matter how hard we try, no matter what we may claim to be able to do, the Divine Mystery will always be greater than any attempt we might make at encapsulation. But, the other truth is that that's ok – because God has never asked us to define God. God has only ever asked us to remain in the vine – to be in relationship with God in Jesus Christ. And, the sooner we let go of our need to grasp God, and embrace the opportunity to simply be with God, the sooner we can truly know the marvelous joy, and peace, of the relationship God offers to us in faith.