

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on May 2, 2021.

IRENÆUS: SETTING BOUNDRIES

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. II Peter 2:1

One of my favorite hymns since childhood is “The Church’s One Foundation.” The two most recent Presbyterian hymnbooks include a new verse that was not found in the red hymnal of my youth. This verse, I believe, sounds strange to modern ears. The new verse begins **Though with a scornful wonder, this world sees her oppressed, by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed.**

The word heresy is not one most of us feel comfortable using. When I hear the word heresy it conjures up an image from a Monty Python skit. This image includes clerics clothed in red saying, “No one expects the Spanish Inquisition.” The term heresy reminds us of negative aspects of Christian history with burnings at the stake and excommunications. Heresy would seem to have little relation to the Good News of Jesus’ love.

But then we come to our text for this morning. We read **But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions.** The Greek word that is translated in the New Revised Standard as destructive opinions is heresy. Peter is warning against teachers coming and leading people away from the truth of the Gospel through their own opinions.

Our Luminary for today is Irenaeus. We will explore the experience of Irenaeus who was one of the Christian leaders who dealt with the first great heresy that threatened the church. Irenaeus helped to define orthodox belief. How did he navigate this first threat to Christianity and what can his experience teach us about living in a pluralistic age?

Irenaeus was born around 120 AD. In a town that is now in Turkey. Unlike most early Christian leaders, Irenaeus was raised in a Christian family. He went to Rome to study and became a teacher. He made his way to Lyon in France as a helper to the Bishop. The leaders of the church in Lyon sent him to Rome on a mission. While he was away persecution came upon the church in Lyon. In the persecution the Bishop was killed – so on his return Irenaeus became the Bishop of Lyon. He died in 202AD.

Irenaeus’ principle work is called ***Against Heresies***. This work is directed primarily against what is called Gnosticism. Gnosticism was a philosophical-religious movement that grew up in the ancient world. For a long time, the sources of information about Gnosticism came from the writings of its adversaries. This situation changed dramatically with the discovery in 1945 in Nag Hammadi in Egypt, of a collection of

twelve codices written in the fourth century containing Gnostic works in a Coptic translation. Since 1945 there has been a small cottage industry that seeks to understand and for some writers to promote a Gnostic worldview.

The word Gnostic comes from the Greek word for knowledge. Followers of this movement called themselves Gnostics meaning those capable of knowledge. In general, the Gnostics used Christian language but denied some core doctrines of the Church.

Most of the Gnostics denied the goodness of the created order. Many understood the created physical world as being evil. The spirit was considered good, while the flesh thought to be evil. Thus, Gnostics rejected the idea of the full incarnation of Christ. Some rejected the idea that Jesus had a physical body.

The Gnostics did not rely on Scripture as the source of truth, but rather claimed that Jesus had passed on secret wisdom to his disciples. Many denied the redemptive power of Jesus' death on the cross.

Irenaeus was concerned that this highly intellectual and elitist movement would lead people away from being able to follow Christ. He knew that seemingly new ideas can be attractive. He wrote:

“Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced more true than truth itself.”

In his writings Irenaeus appeals to Scripture, tradition and reason to refute the argument of the Gnostics. His goal was to preserve the Good News that in Jesus' death and resurrection we have been given the gifts of forgiveness, love and eternal life.

What do we learn today from Irenaeus' experience in wrestling with Heresy?

First, Irenaeus teaches us to reject appeals to elitism in religion. One of the aspects that made Gnosticism attractive was its promise of making you a part of an elite community that had secret knowledge.

There has been a revival of this kind of modern thinking in some Christian circles. This is found most crassly in books such as the Divinci Code. There are writers who promise to give you the inside scoop – the real truth about reality. This will make you part of the inner circle. They manipulate people by their vanity, our very human need to feel important. Heresy feeds on this base human drive for status. Any movement that says finally they have the true interpretation of the truth is not to be trusted.

Secondly, Irenaeus teaches us that heresy often limits and rejects the authority of Scripture and Tradition. The Gnostics taught that Scripture was not enough. One

needed the secret knowledge that they possessed. We should always be on alert when a book or a preacher or a teacher proclaims that they have the key to understanding the truth or that they have the correct way to read the Bible or they know how history might unfold.

Thirdly, Irenaeus teaches us that most heresies result from an overemphasis on one aspect of truth rather than complete falsehood. The Gnostics knew that God is spirit and that is true. But they so focused on this that they taught that matter is evil. We know that so much of Christianity and reality is not fully knowable. So much of our faith requires balance and humility.

The Doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that God is three in one. Heresy's developed when groups emphasized the oneness of God to such an extent that the persons of the Trinity were excluded. Other Heresy's so focused on the three-ness that the unity of God was excluded.

We know that Jesus was both human and divine. Yet some heresies have so focused on Jesus' divinity that they denied there was even a human Jesus. Other groups have so emphasized Jesus' humanity that he ceases to be a Savior.

So very often heresy develops from a need for certainty,
A denial of paradox
And a rejection of mystery.

Fourthly, Irenaeus's experience teaches us that the function of doctrine and creeds are to set boundaries within which we can discover truth.

I believe that most people assume that creeds and doctrines were created in an attempt to set out a positive concrete set of beliefs that correspond exactly to reality. But I do not believe that this is historically true.

Irenaeus wrote in response to a group of people teaching things about the faith that he knew were not true. He wrote to combat false ideas; he did not attempt to create a theology that explained all truth. The early leaders of the Church did not seek to create theological statements that covered every question, they rather reacted to ideas they knew were false.

A couple of hundred years later, Arius, a deacon in the Church in Alexandria, said that there was a time when the Son of God did not exist. He was denying that the son was really God. The argument that ensued led to a formulation that says God is both three persons and God is one. The doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery and a paradox.

Years later a monk named Nestorius denied that Mary was Theotokas which means God-bearing. The turmoil and arguments this generated led to the Council of

Chalcedon that proclaimed that Jesus was one person, but both fully human and fully divine. Again, a paradox and mystery.

It is interesting that we do not have one clear doctrine on the atonement. The atonement means that Jesus' death and resurrection has made us one with God. There are many theological theories on how Jesus' grace is made available. But the Church never chose one as being the exact truth. This may well be because no major figure ever said the cross does not matter.

Again, let me try to be clear: the purpose of most creeds and doctrines is not to say this is the truth, but rather to set boundaries within which the truth can be discovered.

Another metaphor I would use is to understand creeds and doctrine to function as treasure maps. If we follow them to a specific area, they tell us where to dig for the treasure which is the truth of the love of God.

I believe that Irenaeus teaches us that the Church is not to be a group of people who think in exactly the same way about every aspect of faith. We are not men and women who believe the same things. We are people with different understandings and approaches who share a hunger for God.

Remember, Christianity is not merely an intellectual exercise – it is a way of life. The truth is not so much to be understood as lived. The truth is to shape us into goodness. It is to form us into the person God is calling us to be.

This is clear in my favorite quote from Irenaeus of Lyons. He wrote: **“The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God.”**

We begin to be fully alive when –

We resist the siren songs of elitism and private knowledge
And with open hearts and minds accept the paradox
And mystery which is God.

If we follow the map of Scripture
and dig in the boundaries given by doctrine
we will discover a great treasure.

That treasure is the grace, acceptance and love of Jesus.
And that grace can make us fully alive.