

Belonging to the Truth

by

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Christ the King Sunday

John 18:33-38a

³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” ³⁴Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” ³⁵Pilate replied, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” ³⁶Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” ³⁷Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” ³⁸Pilate asked him, “What is truth?” After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, “I find no case against him.

Pilate could have been standing in any courtroom in the United States this week when he asked his famous question: What is truth? Pilate could have asked that question in Kenosha, Wisconsin, at the trial of Kyle Rittenhouse where people like me have stood on the sidelines wondering: How on earth does a 17-year-old have access to a military grade style of AR-15 rifle and the idea that he can quell a massive street protest? While others persuasively argued this was simply a matter of self-defense.

Pilate could have asked that question down in Brunswick, Georgia, where three men presumed to make a “citizen’s arrest” of Ahmaud Arbery who liked to walk through houses under construction, and who died in the close range shooting. Pilate could have been in that courtroom asking “What is truth?” while the defense attorneys argued that race is not a factor but they shouldn’t let “too many black pastors” sit with the family.

Pilate could have asked that question in the courtroom that found Alex Jones liable of defamation for his Infowars company repeatedly calling the Sandy Hook massacre of young children and their teachers a hoax.

“What is truth,” Pilate might have asked in just about any room in the United States Capitol building this week, and especially where the January 6th Insurrection committee is having its hearings.

That question falls from the lips of Pilate dripping with irony and resignation and cynicism and a tinge of despair so evident now in all these places and more: What is truth?

It has been six years since the Oxford Dictionary word of the year was *post-truth* in 2016, and the word was chosen after a decade of use. They say across a wide spectrum of academics and pundits, we live in a post-truth era, meaning we live in a time when facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. So Pilate’s question about truth is actually our question now when people say things like “I have my truth and you have your truth,” and words like veracity, honesty, sincerity, accuracy have become undependable and certainly untrustworthy virtues.

Michael Rich of the non-profit research outfit, the Rand Corporation, has released a report called “Truth Decay,” saying: “This is.... a dangerous and unusual time in history. Americans not only feel entitled to their own opinions, but.... a growing number of them.... also feel entitled to cherry-pick facts to support their opinion, or even commission up new ‘facts’ if necessary.... When everyone has their own facts,” he concludes, “then nobody really has any facts at all.”¹

So then, as we survey the landscape of this post-truth time it is not hard to imagine how we may be becoming quite like Pilate because we are living in a moment when we hear our own voices dripping with irony and cynicism, resignation and even despair.

In many ways, Pilate is a sympathetic character in this scene. He is the local representative of the Roman Empire, the greatest power of his time. He is a long way from home trying to keep the peace in a hotbed of political and religious turmoil. At the trial of Jesus, he has been pulled into a conflict instigated by the local religious authorities. When Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” he is simply looking for a logical reason to convict him and get the local religious fanatics off his back. However, the title King is loaded with political, as well as religious, connotations because what it means to the Romans is “Insurrection.” Pilate is trying to find a technicality on which to base a political judgment and placate the religious leaders who claim Jesus is not abiding by their legal code.

Now, in order to understand the difference between the truth Pilate is after and the truth Jesus embodies, we have to ask ourselves, “How do we know when something is true?” I am grateful to my friend here, Rich Allman, who helped me break down the modes of understanding how we discern truth. Without Rich’s help, I was heading toward spending an hour mid-sermon trying to explain epistemology!

Calling upon the work of Georgetown University’s Monika Hellwig, Rich reminded me of three definitions for discerning truth. First there is logically verifiable truth as in mathematics. We don’t argue that two plus two equals four. Second, there is the empirically demonstrated truth; vaccines reduce the likelihood of diseases.

¹ “Truth Decay,” Rand.org, with thanks to Tom Are who referenced this quote in “Preservation of the Truth,” Village Presbyterian, 9/26/21.

Finally, there is the ground of morality upon which we stand which is harder to logically or empirically verify, but which actually leads to a more profound understanding of essential truths: We cannot use mathematics or empirical data to prove our love for another. We cannot prove that by the grace of God, the moral arc of the universe is bending toward justice and peace. We cannot prove that Jesus was raised from the dead or that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. And yet these are the very truths that fill our lives with hope and meaning and purpose. We know when love is true. We know what genuine peace feels like. This week of Thanksgiving, we know we cannot count the blessings of God’s grace. Yet these are the very truths that fill our lives with hope and meaning and purpose, indeed.

Pilate, you see, was not looking for the kind of truth that inspires hope, meaning and purpose. Nonetheless, Jesus does answer his questions – truthfully – but from that ground of morality, those principles and values upon which we stand, which are harder to logically or empirically verify. Pilate is asking Jesus facts about his identity, trying to probe for political and seditious activity, but Jesus responds with answers about relationship, about belonging, about a Truth that inspires hope, and meaning and purpose far beyond the evidence of this courtroom scene at his headquarters while a cross is being constructed for an execution outside.

As New Testament scholar Thomas Slater notes: “Too often we, like Pilate, close ourselves off to the whole truth, because it is unpleasant or simply unwanted. We do not want complex answers. We want simple answers that bring less stress and less reflection, ignoring the reality of nuance and inconsistency common to human existence. We want the truth that convinces us, not the truth that convicts us. We want the truth that affirms us, not the truth that challenges us. We want a truth in our own image, not in the image of God.” Slater goes on, “Christ challenges us to look for truth from unusual persons in unusual places and to accept them even when acceptance makes us uncomfortable and challenges our assumptions. (Here) Truth does not reside with Pilate and Rome but with a carpenter from Nazareth.”²

The truth of Jesus of Nazareth is not bound to the facts and the evidence. Certainly not in that mock courtroom of a sham trial on the day of his death. When Pilate asks Jesus, “What is truth?” Jesus says not one word; Jesus just stands there

² Thomas Slater, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, year B, vol. 3, p. 507.

because he is the truth, and the only way to understand what that really means is to listen to his voice, and to claim the ground of our being is belonging to God through him.

Friends, next Sunday the Christian calendar will open upon a new year as we begin our Advent journey again toward Christmas. In the wisdom of the church's liturgical rhythms we end the year today proclaiming Christ as King. In the sadness, divisiveness and uncertainty of our days, admittedly to make this claim requires a huge leap of faith. The pandemic continues, with the viral numbers creeping up again, despite the widespread availability of vaccines. The courtroom scenes around the country have us perplexed about the increasing violence in our society and the deep divisions in our culture. The economic disparities between rich and poor keep getting wider, and the wider world is reeling under the threats of climate change, famine and masses of people forced into migration. There is much to keep us cynical and despairing. But the claim of our scripture invites us to transcend the facts on the ground with a renewed call to faith in Christ, the King who reigns over all of it with love and compassion, with peace and justice, with promises of redemption and resurrection.

In 1966 a coal mine disaster struck the Welsh village of Aberfan, killing scores of people, many of them children taken down while at their village school. In an episode of the television series "The Crown," based on the disaster, Queen Elizabeth is portrayed as too distant and emotionally reserved to respond to the crisis. She even refuses to attend the funeral, sending her husband Prince Philip instead. At the funeral, the camera pans across an almost unbearably tragic sight: the villagers gathered in the cemetery before an open grave holding rows of coffins of their lost children, dozens of them, one placed next to the other. Philip weeps as the villagers, in profound grief, begin to sing Charles Wesley's hymn "Jesus Lover of My Soul":

Other refuge have I none,
hangs my helpless soul on Thee;
Leave, oh, leave me not alone,
still support and comfort me.
All my trust on Thee is stayed,
All my help from Thee I bring;
Cover my defenseless head
with the shadow of Thy wing.

When Prince Philip goes back to Buckingham Palace, the queen asks him, “How was it?” “Eighty-one children were buried today,” he tells her. “The rage... in all their faces, behind all the eyes. They didn’t smash things up. They didn’t fight in the streets.” “What did they do?” the queen asks. “They sang. The whole community. The most astonishing thing I ever heard.”³

That’s what belonging to the Truth means. Amid the sadness, the uncertainty, the despair – we sing. We sing because we know the ground of our being is based on this truth: through the person of Jesus Christ we belong to God. In a violent world – he reigns in peace. Amid the pandemic death toll ticking higher, he promises resurrection. In the face of our cynicism and despair, he gives us hope, meaning and purpose. He is the love we could never prove, but the love we know.

AMEN.

³ Tom Long, Journal for Preachers, Easter, 2021, p. 6