

What Is Truth?

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What is truth? I admit I have always found this one of the most tantalizing sentences in the entire Bible. And I dare say there are probably thousands of sermons out there with this title, with this focus. It's just so catchy, isn't it? What is truth?

Today's text drops us into the middle of Jesus' passion or crucifixion narrative in the Gospel of John. It covers chapters, and of course, we usually hear it in Holy Week. Today, Christ the King Sunday, we get this little snippet from what is often referred to as 'Jesus' trial before Pilate'. It's an interesting title, because really if you read it in its entirety, if you spend any time with the whole thing, it would more accurately be titled 'Pilate's trial before Jesus.' Because while Pilate might seem to be the one asking all the questions, it is clear that Jesus is in control, not just of the immediate situation, but of all things.

It may seem jarring....why are we back at Jesus' crucifixion in November? Why is our first reading from that disturbing Book of Revelation? As the kids and I discussed, today is the last Sunday of the liturgical or church year. It is the 'end of the story' if you will. We can often forget that the story does not end at the cross, nor even on Easter Sunday. While those events are certainly key and formative, they are not the concluding chapter of God's story. God's story ends when the Kingdom is fully realized. God's story is complete in Christ's second coming, as we call it. Another way to think of that is when the restoration of the cosmos has happened. When indeed, all death has passed, when suffering and crying are no more, as we are told later in Revelation. THAT is when God's story wraps up for this world.

So today, Christ the King Sunday, we remember that there is still more to come. That paradise for all is still over the horizon. That the suffering of this world will one day end in the reign of Christ, in the full coming of the Kingdom. It is all really fancy language to say that this world is not all there is. That something of greater vastness, joy and beauty awaits. And so every year we tell that story from start to finish. Every year, we look at God's truth beginning with the promises of Christmas, to the struggles of Holy Week, to the tragedy of Good Friday's cross, to the surprise of the gift of Easter resurrection, to the birth of the Christian church. We listen to the stories that help shape our lives and our faith, we celebrate all the saints, and then we land here, today, at the end of this world as we know it, at the promise of the full Kingdom to come. And of course, Christ is the king of that kingdom!

The promises of all these stories of faith hang on the tensions between this world and God's world. And today's story of Pilate and Jesus pokes deeply at those tensions. Who is Pilate after all, if not the best...or worst....representation of 'the world'. He is not a Jewish leader, he is of Roman employ. He is the oppressor, the arm of Caesar, the outsider from the Jewish world over which he rules. He is captivated and motivated by all things secular; power, authority, wealth, fame. His career hangs over his head in this entire exchange that alternates between Pilate with Jesus and Pilate with the angry mob. He is caught between doing what is right, letting Jesus go, and his own selfish desires. He knows that if the angry mob is not appeased, word will get back to Rome. The implications for his illustrious career would not be good. And so we all know that in the end, he turns Jesus over to death.

The irony of the section we heard today, is found in the setting. A trial. A place where truth is supposed to be sought and served. But of course that fabulous question hangs over it all; What is truth? Pilate asks Jesus twice if he is a King. Twice Jesus gives an elusive answer, telling Pilate 'my kingdom is not of this world.' He doesn't say 'yeah, I'm a king, but from a place you've never heard.' Neither does he deny that he is a king. Instead he speaks of the kingdom. What he does tell Pilate is that he came into this world to

testify to the truth. And those that belong to the truth, listen to Jesus' voice. To which Pilate snorts back 'what is truth?'

Poor Pilate. He can't or won't see that the answer to his question stares him in the face. What is truth? Truth is God revealed through the person of Jesus. Jesus just told Pilate, and us, that fact. "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." Jesus is the living breathing enactment of Truth. And those who belong to truth, listen to him. That's us folks.

John's gospel is a compellingly woven work from start to finish. He uses vivid imagery to address his consistent themes. And one of those themes is truth. Truth as revealed in Jesus. And so perhaps our question today isn't quite as difficult to answer as we might first suspect. If we want to know the truth, we look to the truth. We seek out Jesus and listen to him. And I have found this compellingly simple in this past week of hysteria and what feels to me like a world gone mad.

In the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks, our country seems to have lost its head. Finding wisdom and calm has been difficult. Finding the truth seems to be even harder. I'm pretty sure I'm preaching to the choir here, but just to be clear; truth is NOT found on your Face Book feed, your Twitter account, or the single media source we might turn to. I am appalled at people's willingness to post and pass along half-truths or even no-truths, without ever checking the validity. In fact, in our house we have a joke about Pope Francis. When folks tell me how much they love the new pope, my question is 'the Face Book Pope or the real pope?' So many of the quotes and claims that are attributed to Pope Francis have absolutely no bearing in reality. And yet, this is the pope people want to have, and so they pass around this undocumented and incorrect drivel.

And that is where I have found myself again this week with social media and the public media. The hysteria around possible Syrian refugees entering our country seems to gain momentum by the hour. So let's make sure we have our facts on that issue straight. A refugee is completely different than an immigrant. Don't get the laws or the conditions or the situations of either, mixed up. President Obama has suggested we welcome 10,000 Syrian refugees by 2017. Not 250,000 as I have heard from some folks. Did you know that the vetting process for a refugee is long, detailed, and extremely time consuming? It takes an average of 2-4 years, often longer, for a refugee to actually make it to our shores. As one quick witted Session member quipped at our meeting Thursday; 'I hardly think that will be the most desirous path for a terrorist!' In the four years since the Syrian crisis has raged, 4 million, 4 MILLION of its citizens have been forced out for fear of their lives. In that same four years, the US has only admitted 1800 refugees from Syria....the process is that arduous.

Now, I could stand up here and present you with all sort of 'facts' on this issue. But facts are only one piece of truth. And I am interested in THE truth. You can research the facts on your own. So, what is truth in this situation? Well, if we listen to John's gospel, Jesus is the truth of God revealed to us here on this earth. And that begins to make this situation pretty easy for me.

Jesus said to feed the hungry and tend to the sick. He said to welcome the stranger and cloth the naked. He said to love your neighbor as yourself. He said to love God first and foremost, above all else. Those truths know no boundaries or borders. Those truths are universal truths. They are not United States truths or Illinois truths. We heard today that those who 'belong to the truth, listen' to the truth. Jesus did NOT say keep yourself safe at all cost to others. He did not say your security rests in keeping a homogenous city or country. He did not say 'be filled with fear'....indeed, he often said 'fear not'.

Why? Because true security, true joy, true life, rests in our relationship with God. Because Christ is the alpha and omega, as our Revelation text assured us. Meaning, God holds all time and all events in the Divine hand. God stands at the beginning and at the end of our history. In between there, this in between time in which we live, this 'in the meantime' space, there will be all sorts of craziness, there will be beauty and there will be ugliness. There will be joy and there will be sadness. There will be dancing and there will be weeping. This is what Jesus is trying to tell Pilate. He is clearly drawing the distinctions between this world, Pilate's kingdom, and God's world, Christ's kingdom. And we belong to that latter kingdom. We belong to Truth. And so for us as Christians, the truth as revealed in Jesus takes precedence over all other human understanding of truth.¹

And that means ALL other understandings. So when our Face Book feeds start spreading fear and misinformation, we look to Jesus to know truth. When political candidates start debating the security of letting refugees into our country, we look to Jesus to know truth. Our truth, the way we live our lives, our guidance, all comes from truth as revealed in the person of Jesus. And I'm pretty sure Jesus would be shaking his head right now over all the energy going into this debate. Because I'm pretty sure Jesus is the guy who told the story about the Samaritan helping the beaten up guy left for dead by the side of the road. I'm pretty sure Jesus is the guy who crossed over national and cultural borders to share his truth with a Samaritan woman at a well, and again with a Syrophonecian woman with a dying child. I'm pretty sure when he said 'shelter the homeless' he didn't just mean the homeless in DuPage County, or in Illinois, or even just in the United States. And I'm very sure he didn't mean just Christian homeless.

Is the world a mess right now? Yes. But, has the world ALWAYS been a mess? Yes! That is the concept of original sin; that the world is broken. That things in this world are NOT how they should be. As Frederick Beuchner says 'Here is the world; beautiful AND terrible things will happen. Do not be afraid.' What is truth? Truth is that we are called to love God with all our heart, all our mind and all our soul. And that we are called to love our neighbor as ourself. And that neighbor knows no boundaries or limits. I am not suggesting that we throw caution to the wind. I am not suggesting that we toss out our stringent vetting process for refugees. What I am suggesting is that we not slam the door on an entire group of people because we are afraid of 'what MIGHT happen.' I am suggesting that we remember God's love is not exclusive, it is not limited, it is most of all NOT bound by political borders that are manmade.

Our Mission Committee had already started the process of looking into sponsoring a Syrian refugee family before the Paris attacks. We will keep moving in that same direction. Why? Because we belong to Truth. And Truth has set us free from fear. And Truth has told us to welcome the stranger, to shelter the homeless, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked. Truth has told us to love one another as we have been loved. That is Truth! Amen.

¹ Emilie Townes, Feasting on The Word, Volume 4 Year B, 334.