

Belong to the Truth

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Text: John 18:33-38a

“What is truth?” Pilate asks Jesus. He doesn’t bother waiting for an answer. It’s a dismissive, rhetorical question, a cynical question from a cynical man. He was literate, and he knew the philosophers could rattle on from morning till night about truth, but Pilate was a man of power. He knew that truth could be shaped and established by the application of force.

For example, the city Pilate was staying in, Jerusalem, was seen by the Jews as God’s gift to them, together with the surrounding land, from time immemorial to all generations. But Pilate knew all it would take was a few Roman legions on a brutal military campaign, and the Jewish people could be dispossessed of their homeland and their holy city. If you’ve got power, truth can be altered. It was that simple.

And it worked at the individual level too. If you needed a scapegoat, somebody to blame for a crime or a disturbance, you could seize some poor fellow, and the truth became whatever you said it was, because as the Roman prefect you had the soldiers to back you up. Take this prisoner, Jesus, for example. The local authorities don’t seem to like him—who knows why? It’s not Pilate’s concern. But Pilate’s job is to keep the peace in this unruly province at the edge of the Roman Empire. If he can pin Jesus down as an insurrectionist, as a trouble-maker, then he’ll have an excuse to execute him, and then the local leaders will be happy, the tax revenues will keep flowing, and Pilate will stay in the emperor’s good graces, with all the rewards that brings. What is truth? Truth is whatever Pilate needs it to be.

What is truth for us? Often it’s still about power, as political figures push the stories that serve their interest, and hidden figures spread disinformation on social media. I’m not sure why people’s politics would impact the choices they make about their health, but for some reason the way a state voted in last year’s presidential election is correlated with the rate of vaccination for COVID.¹ It’s disheartening to think that the way we see the world is filtered in this way. So even though Pilate may not be interested in the answer to his own question, it’s a good one, even for us today. What is truth?

It’s an important question because of what Jesus tells Pilate. Jesus is on trial for his life. Pilate presses him on whether he is a king, whether he is challenging Roman authority. And Jesus says first that the kind of power he wields isn’t the same as the kind Pilate wields. It’s not an authority that has its origin in this world, where force and violence carry the day. So, for this reason, there is no need for Jesus’ followers to fight for him. That’s not how his kingship, his power works. But when Pilate presses him again, on whether he is a king, Jesus tells us what he is, what his purpose is. And it has to do with truth. Jesus says that he came to testify to the truth, and that those who

¹ Domenico Montenegro, “There’s A Stark Red-Blue Divide When It Comes To States’ Vaccination Rates.” *NPR*. 9 Jun 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/09/1004430257/theres-a-stark-red-blue-divide-when-it-comes-to-states-vaccination-rates>. Accessed 11/20/2021.

belong to the truth listen to his voice.

What is truth, and what does it mean to *belong* to the truth?

Our English word “truth” is related to the word “trust.” It comes from a common ancient root, meaning “solid, firm, durable.” It means something reliable, a ground that you can stand on, a direction—as in “true north”—that you can navigate by. And the ancient Hebrew word for truth, “emet,” was much the same. It’s related to the word “amen,” which ends our prayers, and which begins so many sayings of Jesus: “Truly, truly I say to you” or literally, “Amen, amen I say to you.” The truth has substance. It holds up under investigation and scrutiny. It endures through hardship and oppression, like a wrongly-convicted prisoner who maintains his innocence.

It’s possible, though, to tell the truth without telling the *whole* truth. You come across two kids scuffling and ask them what happened. One of them says, “It all started when he hit me back.” No, that’s not when it started! Tell the whole story! Tell the whole truth. Begin at the beginning. When we only have half the story, when we only have one person’s account, we have an incomplete truth, and a truth with pieces missing is not durable or reliable.

The Greek language that the gospel passage is written in has a word for truth, ἀλήθεια, that emphasizes just this. It means “unconcealed,” or “un-overlooked.” It’s a word that means that nothing escapes our notice, that the whole story is available, that everything is in plain sight, for everyone to see.

Jesus came to testify to the truth, to bear witness to the truth. He came to uncover the whole story, so that nothing is held back. He came to set our feet on a reality that is firm and grounded, that holds up under us, that won’t fail or collapse. And everything he has said, everything he has done, serves to reveal this truth. But Jesus himself summarized it best in his own words, when he said, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may ... have eternal life” (John 3:16). That’s the truth. That’s the source of Jesus’ authority—God’s love for the world, and God’s desire for us to have abundant life that starts now and goes on forever. Jesus claims no power to coerce, only power to testify and to be followed: “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,” he says.

This authority, this power that Jesus possesses isn’t *from* this world, but it’s not other-worldly either. God’s love isn’t “pie in the sky in the sweet by-and-by.” Jesus has fed hungry multitudes, not with empty platitudes, but with bread and fish. He’s healed a man blind from birth in defiance of the authorities. He’s overturned tables in the Temple, driving out the animal vendors and money-changers with a whip. He’s rescued a woman caught in adultery from death by stoning, and he’s raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. The truth Jesus testifies to isn’t a spiritual truth that exists only somewhere else, apart from this world. It makes a difference in the here and now—feeding, healing, protecting, forgiving, making new beginnings. The love of God that Jesus testifies to is the truth, the whole truth that matters, that you can build a life on, and that love is fierce and powerful.

What does it mean to belong to the truth?

What does it look like if we’re plugged into the truth we see in Jesus—that God loves the world, that God wants abundant life for all people and all creation?

It means we’re not content with half-truths. Forgiveness is one way of telling the whole truth. You hurt me. It’s important to name the hurt. But it’s also important to name the God whose grace is big enough to make us both whole, so that this hurt doesn’t define me or you. I’ve experienced this gift personally, and it’s powerful. But it also works for nations as well. This month saw the passing of former South African President F. W. de Klerk, the last leader of that country elected under the apartheid

system, who after much bloodshed and struggle handed over the reins of power to Nelson Mandela, the first President elected by all South Africans. After so much violence, you might have expected the new majority government to pay back with harsh justice the wrongs that were done. But instead, the new government turned to Christian leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu to form a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose job it was to uncover the whole truth about what had happened. Those who had committed violence during the apartheid era could come forward and confess their crimes, and if they told the whole truth, they would be forgiven. What power there is in forgiveness—the power to shape a largely peaceful transformation from white supremacy to democracy! “What is truth?” asked Pilate. The truth is that grace, mercy, forgiveness, humble honesty shape a better future than violence. Jesus lived that truth. He testified to it with his life and his death on the cross. And those who listen to his voice embody it still today, in public as well as private life.

What does it mean to belong to the truth?

It means listening to the voices that are silenced and pushed aside, not covering up or ignoring the hurts around us. I’m mindful of the criminal trials that have been in the news this week, and while criminal trials are focused on the actions of one person and what should happen to them, they impact our neighbors in many different ways. Listen, in the days that come, especially to friends and neighbors who are people of color. Listen to the voices of those who are hurting or angry or fearful about doing something as simple as going out for a jog. Belonging to the truth means listening for the truth of people who don’t have the power of law and force on their side, people like Jesus as he stood before Pilate.

What does it mean to belong to the truth?

In this Thanksgiving week, it means remembering that the blessings of this good creation are meant to be shared. Thank you to those of you who have brought food for the Center for Food Action or shared with neighbors in some other way. Your witness joins you with Jesus, who fed hungry people and told us, “I am the bread of life.”

Jesus reigns. But unlike Pilate, he reigns in the power of God’s love, the love of one who lays down his life for his friends. Let us, the church, hear his voice. Let us belong to the truth, and live in his kingdom, which is in this world but not of it. Let Christ rule in our hearts, in our church, in our world. Amen.