

Text – John 18:33-37 Theme: “Belonging to the Truth”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

What is truth? We know we need it, and we expect to hear it from people in positions of authority and trust, but sometimes that doesn't happen – like when Richard Nixon was the 37<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.

President Nixon claimed he had no knowledge of a botched burglary at the Democratic national headquarters in Washington, D. C.'s Watergate building, but recorded conversations in the oval office of the Whitehouse eventually proved otherwise.

Rather than face impeachment, President Nixon resigned from office on August 9, 1974. Though he is to-date the only U. S. President to resign from office, Richard Nixon is undoubtedly not the only one who has ever lied while in office.

We want to hear the truth from our elected officials, but we cannot always trust them to give it to us. A website called PolitiFact.com now offers the service of analyzing political statements and judging whether they are true, mostly true, half true, mostly false or false. Their worst rating is “pants on fire,” as in “Liar, liar, pants on fire!”

Truth can be hard to find, although the search for it has been going on for thousands of years.

“We sometimes discover truth where we least expected to find it,” said Quintilian, a Roman of the first century.

The Roman Empire was powerful and often cruel, but it contained leaders who valued the search for truth. Because of this, we shouldn't be surprised when Pontius Pilate asks Jesus the question, “What is truth?” (John 18:38).

Pilate, the Roman governor, poses this question before pronouncing Jesus' death sentence. Jesus has been brought to him because only the Roman Empire could legally carry out an execution.

The Jewish leaders want Jesus to die, but they don't have the authority to kill him. So they take Jesus to Pilate. The governor asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate believes that a Jewish king would be a threat to Roman authority.

If Jesus says “no,” he stands a chance of being released, but he would be telling a half-truth. If Jesus says “yes,” then he'll be convicted of treason against the Roman emperor and given an instant death sentence. Life and death depend on his answer.

But Jesus is too smart to respond with a simple “yea” or “nay.” Like an experienced debater, Jesus says, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”

Either Jesus wants to know – or he wants others to know – if Pilate has personal knowledge of his kingship, or if he is relying on the hearsay evidence of the Jewish leaders. The governor likely replies with an edge in his voice: “I am not a Jew, am I?”

Pilate wants to distance himself from this whole messy affair, seeing it as a Jewish problem, nothing in which he wants to get involved. And yet he has a job as governor, one that requires him to administer justice.

“What have you done?” he asks Jesus. Tell me what you have really done, Jesus – Pilate wants to know the truth. Once again, Jesus refuses to give a direct response. Jesus says, “My kingdom is not from this world” – it doesn’t look anything like the Roman Empire.

“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.”

Pilate appears to hear a part of what Jesus is saying, the part about his kingdom. “So you are a king?” he asks him. But Jesus responds indirectly again. “You say that I am a king,” he replies. “For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

Instead of doing the royal work of leading armies, collecting taxes and punishing criminals, Jesus says that his mission is to “testify to the truth.”

His followers are all those who belong to the truth and listen to his voice.

Clearly, Jesus has not come to take the world by force. Instead, he has come to invite people to enter into a relationship with him by listening to his voice and belonging to the truth.

All of which leads to the obvious question from Pilate, “What is truth?” This is an honest question. Sure, Pilate is getting frustrated with this whole matter, but he is enough of a Roman philosopher to wonder about the nature of truth. He really wants to know: “What is truth? Tell me, Jesus.”

And what does Jesus say? Nothing. He just stands there. His silence is his answer to the question. He is saying to Pilate, “Look at me. I am truth. I am the way, the truth, and the life. Follow me, and I’ll show you the path to abundant life.”

But Pilate doesn’t get it. Sadly, he turns away and goes in another direction. The wheels of Roman justice continue to turn, and Jesus is flogged, mocked and put to death on a cross. Pilate fails to grasp what his fellow Roman, Quintilian, understood so well: “We sometimes discover truth where we least expected to find it.”

We are left with the question, “What is truth?”

This passage teaches that truth is not a statement, a concept or a school of thought – that’s the kind of truth that a Roman philosopher would understand.

Instead, truth is a person – a person named Jesus – and we are all invited to enter into a relationship with this Jesus who is the truth. For Jesus, truth is something that is felt, acted out, and embraced in all of life. This is the kind of truth that you don’t just think about; you belong to it. It is a way of life.

That’s why Jesus says, “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” So what exactly is this truth to which we are invited to belong?

In the Gospel of John, Jesus performs his first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, turning a whole lot of water into wine so the wedding celebration can continue (John 2:1-11). At its most basic level, this is a miracle of hospitality.

Jesus goes on to feed a crowd of 5,000 and then another of 4,000, revealing his desire to nourish people both physically and spiritually. He washes the feet of his disciples, institutes Holy Communion, and, after his resurrection, cooks a fish breakfast for his disciples (John 21:1-24).

Jesus teaches us what it means to care for each other in the parable of the Good Samaritan, welcomes little children in spite of his disciples’ objections and instructs his followers in the nature of hospitality with the words, “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (Luke 14:13).

So, what is truth? In a word, the truth of Jesus appears to be radical “hospitality.” It’s embracing all people with God’s love and grace. Jesus understands that hospitality is best directed to persons on the margins of society, and this causes him to be criticized repeatedly for eating and drinking with undesirable people.

“Look,” say his opponents, “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” But the hospitality of Jesus is a powerful hospitality, one that stands up to opposition and abuse. This is not punch-and-cookies hospitality; it is bold and muscular hospitality.

Jesus never allows criticism to disrupt his table fellowship with those most in need, and those who most need to hear his message.

So if we are going to model our ministries on the ministry of Jesus, we need to enter into the lives of our distressed neighbors, and practice hospitality in the same way that Jesus did.

So, what is truth?

It is to practice the radical hospitality of Jesus, and to welcome all people with God's great love and amazing grace. Remember – the truth is not an idea; it is a way of life. Jesus says, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

We act on this truth when we welcome guests in our worship, when we give people food through our Food Pantry, when we eat together at church, and when we pray together, and when we study the Bible together.

The truth of Christianity is a welcoming way of life, following Christ as our King who is the way, the truth and the life. Let's belong to this truth. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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