

John 18:33-38
November 24, 2024

Truth

Among the great pursuits of the Age of Reason and Science is the search for truth. At its heart this search is not, as it were, for the knowledge about things, what Frederick Buechner called, “particular truths.” I should make a footnote here, because I am indebted to Buechner for some of the ideas in this message.

By particular truths, he means knowledge about this and that under the notion that if we could pile up enough knowledge about ourselves and about the world, then it would add up to truth.

The search for truth is not first about the cure for cancer or the search for renewable energy or better social media technology, though all are worthy endeavors; but for truth itself, the kind of truth that is meant when in John we read, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth . . .” or when Jesus said, “you shall know the truth,” or . . . “*I am the Truth*”

On this last Sunday of Liturgical Year B, Thanksgiving week, before the first Sunday in Year C, we are encountered by a text from the Gospel of John that is more associated with Lent and the Passion of Christ than with Thanksgiving, or Advent, but it *is* about the question of truth, instead of in the context of the Passion, we consider it in the context of the birth.

In it, we find Jesus standing trial in Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, and the one who had the power of life and death over him (in the earthly sense), and could acquit him or condemn Jesus to death.

There is an interesting conversation in which Pilate asks Jesus if he really is the King of the Jews; an absurd question for Pilate because he already knew that Caesar Tiberius was the King of the Jews, and had been for decades. Any other claim wasn’t so much threatening as comical. Yet Jesus manages a little defiance. His reply has a little sting to it. “Is that your own idea, or did you come by it from someone else?”

As one might imagine, Pilate was not happy with this impertinence, and asks another question that is met also with an impertinent reply. “What have you done?” By way of reply, Jesus answered the first question, “My kingdom is not of this world.” He goes on to say, “If it was, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews . . . *my kingdom is from another place.*”

In the search for truth, “the other place,” is a problem for the modern mindset. We must all decide if we believe in a, “not of this world kingdom.”

“*You are a king, then (gotcha),*” Pilate said. And Jesus continues, “*You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world - to testify to the truth . . .*”

At this point, the governor ends the conversation, but before he leaves the room to declare the innocence of Jesus and then condemn him to death anyway, he does ask one more question, and it is one of the all time questions, and our question, always the great question about truth. Here, to refer again to Buechner, he is not asking after a particular truth, but, “truth itself.” He is met with silence. Jesus does not reply. Pilate leaves the room with no answer.

Before we go on, let us pause, and listen to the non-answer of Jesus. It is easy to just read the next verse in which Pilate leaves the room and everything that happens next happens, and skip over the fact that the governor, of all people, has asked one of the most central and important and interesting questions it is possible for a person to ask.

He has teed it up high and set Jesus up to hit it far, and then left without receiving an answer. My suspicion is that he was being cynical and didn't think there was an answer. If you are like me, you want to stop here and wait for Jesus to body forth some kind of a response. Not, “what is *the* truth?” about this or that,” but, “what *is* truth?”

How can Jesus remain silent in the face of such a question? How could Pilate ask such a question and then leave the room? How can we just read on without saying, “yes, that, what is truth?” Yet there is no answer. It is at this place that Jesus diverges from science, which never stops asking questions and listening for answers, because he does not give a first

century version of an answer to a scientific question. Apparently he is not concerned with science.

And this is also where he parts ways with philosophy and religion, because he does not give a first century version of a philosophical or theological answer either. Or, I guess, if one is cynical like Pilate, one could make an argument that the reason Jesus didn't give an answer, is because he did not know the answer, or at least not in a way that he could explain in the split second before Pilate left the room, or that it takes to read the next line in the text. “What is truth?” Pilate asked, and so do I; perhaps also you.

There is good news for everyone. For the non-answer of Jesus *is* an answer, it is *the* answer. The question of Pilate and all of us is answered in Jesus, who literally bodies forth an answer, his body. Some questions do not require a verbal answer or the written summary of the results of an investigation.

In this case the answer to the world's and history's great question of truth was standing right in front of Pilate as he left the room to say to the crowd outside that he found no fault with Jesus, but if they really wanted him to be sentenced to death, then so be it; as he washed his hands of the whole affair like he didn't care.

What is truth? The life of the world is truth. Our lives are truth; the good and the bad. Marriages are truth and so are divorces; births are truth and so are deaths; poverty is truth and so is wealth; justice is

truth and so is injustice, good fortune is truth and so is bad, they are all truth because they are all real, they happen and we experience them (there is something like this in the Book of Ecclesiastes, “there is a time for everything,” and it is all truth).

Infancy, youth, maturity, are truth, try to stop them. The earth spinning on its axis and the light of the sun, they are truth. Sin is truth, and by God’s grace righteousness is truth as well. The trial before Pilate is truth, even if it is a kangaroo court. The verdict is truth, and the sentence, the execution and the burial. The cross is truth. All of it. And here, standing in front of the Governor of Judea - is truth.

Right in front of Pilate, and for that matter, right in front of us, you and I, is the truth of God reconciling the world; the Resurrection of the Dead; the Forgiveness of Sin; the Healing of the Nations; the Love of God.

It is all Truth, but not in a forensic kind of way, a way that can be the result of an historical or scientific study; but Truth, nonetheless, in a way that can be *believed*. We are not called to prove, but to *believe*. That makes all the difference. And he is standing there right in front of us.

The truth that he is, claims us. And its claim on us is that God is *for us*; for *our* forgiveness, *our* healing, and *our* liberation, now and forever. Its claim reverses the trajectory of our lives from death to life; from condemnation and guilt to reconciliation and

acceptance; from evil to good; from hate to love, despair to hope, chaos to peace.

The cynical question of the Governor of Judea is flipped on its head, the very condemnation he will eventually declare, is the truth of God’s saving the world. Let us believe in that truth, in Jesus, and let that faith be the source of our goodness, and love and hope; let it be the source of our peace, and the joy of the season that approaches, and for the sake of the season, our let it be the source of our gratitude as well, Amen.

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