

B Christ the King 11.25.18

John 18:33-38a

Focus Statement: The Truth is that God loves the world.

If you've been here on a Good Friday, you may remember that it is my Lenten discipline every year to memorize the Passion narrative from John's Gospel and recite it on Good Friday. I've done this for four years now, and every time it is this dialogue between Jesus and Pilate, and especially Pilate's question of what is truth that catches my attention. I spend a lot of time each year mulling over that question and how to recite it. Is Pilate curious, "what is truth?" Is he incredulous, "what is truth?" Is he mocking, "what is truth?"

A bit of an aside, but it seems important to remind folk, how much interpretation goes into reading. We think we're reading something objectively, but there is no tone in the written word, we are inserting the nuance ourselves. Beware, or at least be wary of people who tell you they read scripture objectively, because at best they are unaware of the blinders they are bringing to their understanding. Understanding the nuance of written language requires looking into the history of the person, trying to understand the context, and even then it is no more than an educated guess.

And as a good Millennial, this idea that our best interpretation and understanding is no more than an educated guess doesn't bother me, it actually is what makes scripture, makes faith so fascinating, so rich and deep and powerful. Because Pilate wanted an answer and Jesus instead offered him a relationship, something which by its very nature is not fixed, but moving. It is always growing and changing, and forcing us to grow and change, and I loved that depth and complexity about Jesus. I loved the idea that Truth, the Truth with a

Capital T that is Jesus, is bigger than something we can know, richer and even more flexible than facts. The world always felt, to my questioning millennial sensibilities, like it held so much curiosity and diversity, and I needed a God who could hold all my questions, my curiosities, my doubts, and my fears. That the Truth of Jesus was relationship was a Truth that felt big enough for that.

That was the sermon I would have preached on that text two years ago. And it probably would have been a decent sermon, though it also probably would have made a better systematic theology paper so you maybe should be glad that I don't generally preach on Good Friday. But in the last two years, the phrase "alternative facts" has entered our national lexicon, and I've found myself having to reevaluate my relationship to the concept of truth. Because I love, and I really do love, if you've been to the bible chats on Wednesdays, you've experienced this, the idea that each of us bring both our own perspectives and our own limitations, and only by hearing the perspectives of many different people can we overcome our own limited worldview and come closer to full knowledge. But the side of me that values logic and reason bristles when that one friend on Facebook, and we all have that one friend, mine is a loose acquaintance from DC, posts that thing that is just objectively untrue, and I find myself shouting at the computer screen, "Have you never heard of Snopes?" Sometimes I feel like I can't tell if the world's gone crazy or if I have, so different are the realities that seem to exist between people.

People living next to each other and experiencing very different versions of reality is not new, a very similar thing was happening in Jesus' time. Jesus lived during what was known

as the Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome. Pax Romana was a two-hundred year period of relative peace and stability that started when Octavian, who would eventually become Caesar Augustus, defeated Mark Antony, ending the Final War of the Roman Republic and transforming Rome from a Republic to an Empire. If Caesar Augustus sounds familiar, we hear his name on Christmas Eve, “There came a decree from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered...”

I described the Pax Romana as a period of “relative peace,” because whether you experienced peace depended on how you sat in favor with the Emperor. We’ve talked before about the Siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 68 CE, a battle so violent that the historian Josephus described blood running ankle deep through the streets, that was during this so-called period of peace. A peace held through strength and through the brutal destruction of anyone who posed a threat to the power held by those who benefited from that peace.

Pilate was very much part of that kind of peace. The synoptic Gospels give Pilate a bit of a pass, but John’s description of Pilate is probably the most accurate. He was a ruthless leader, most historians of his time described him as vicious, brutal, and cruel. His participation in the trial of Jesus had little to do with concern for Jesus’ guilt or innocence, rather Pilate was interested in humiliating his adversaries, the religious leaders, and further cementing his own power.

The Peace of Rome was Pilate's truth. For Pilate, it was *true* that he was living in a period of peace, that it was his role to maintain that peace, and that the best way to do that was to crush anyone who questioned that peace or threatened his power. What was true for Pilate was what worked best for him, what brought him power, and strength and control.

And then Jesus showed up in Pilate's headquarters, early in the morning on the day before the Passover. Brought over at the behest of Caiaphas the High Priest by the contingent of police and soldiers who had arrested and bound him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Already betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, abandoned by his followers, Jesus was alone, imprisoned, and constrained, the opposite of everything Pilate saw himself to be. But when Pilate started questioning Jesus, immediately everything shifted.

"Are you the King of the Jews?" he asked, a question I hear as thick with mockery. In Pilate's truth, Jesus could not be a king, for kings were powerful, mighty and in control, not like this itinerate preacher in chains before him. "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Jesus replied calmly, taking charge in that moment not just of the conversation, but of the entire scene. The question essentially, are you, Pilate, really in control, or are you no more than a puppet for others? Pilate, on his heels, answered back, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?" And Jesus, in that Jesus way, answered the question that Pilate was not asking, "My kingdom is not from this world."

This Sunday we're celebrating Christ the King Sunday. We tend to think of church festivals as being ancient, and most of them are. But Christ the King Sunday is actually a very recent addition to the liturgical calendar, less than one-hundred years old. Pope Pius the eleventh instituted Christ the King Sunday in 1925 as a response his concerns about growing nationalism. We just celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War One on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918, by 1925 Hitler was gaining power in Germany and Benito Mussolini had given up all pretense of Italy being a democracy and firmly established a dictatorship. The purpose of the Feast of Christ the King was to remind believers that since Christ set us free from the bonds of sin, then our loyalties belong to Christ and him alone. There is also an end of days feel to this festival; reminding us that we live in the period between Christ has risen and Christ will come again. That even as things feel chaotic and out of control, and like we heard in last week's reading, many competing voices are claiming they can save us, we have only one savior, in fact we have already been saved, and that savior will in time restore us and all of creation to fullness.

That Jesus is King is not just true, it is Truth. It is Truth because contrary to Pilate's understanding, the Kingdom of God is not a geographical place, with borders that can be patrolled and controlled; the Kingdom of God is a relationship. And because the Kingdom of God isn't a place but a relationship, it cannot be controlled through might and power because you cannot force someone to love you. You can force them to fear you, you can force them to honor you, you can force them to obey you, but you cannot force them to love you. And the Kingdom of God is a kingdom whose boundaries are defined by love, whose justice is legislated by love, whose power is expressed in love.

The Truth of Jesus is that love is the most powerful force of all because it presents not as force, but is power made perfect in weakness. In a few weeks we'll celebrate that this King of the Universe came into the world in a way Pilate could never have imagined, as an infant born in a stable because Augustus forced his parents on the road, becoming a refugee because of the threats of an unstable tyrant, raised not in the center of power but in forgotten, rural Galilee, a man who passed by the powerful, to lift up the powerless, who ate with lepers and prostitutes, and who died to become food for the world. The Truth, is as simple as this, God loves you, and me, and every single other person in the world. Even, dare I say, Pilate. Because the Truth, dear people of God, is this, that God so loves the world. Amen.