

What is Truth?

John 18:33-37

Ute Molitor; First Congregational UCC in Camden, November 25, 2018

Today is *Christ the King* or *Reign of Christ* Sunday and our Gospel text puts us squarely in the arena of the complex interrelationship of religious and political power in Jesus' own time. Based on that text, I wish to shine a light on the difference between the truth as Jesus embodies it and the way power politics deals with truth. The writer of John's Gospel is a master at asking every reader and hearer of the Gospel to come to terms with the question of who Jesus is for each and every one of us. He is asking whether we want to risk embracing the transformational power and truth Jesus embodies or whether we want to acquiesce to the politics of transactional power and domination in the religious and political domain. I don't think that we can or should shirk that question in our own lives and our own time as the events of last week can remind us.

"Maybe he did, maybe he didn't." These words are part of President Trump's response to the CIA's findings that the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman had knowledge of and likely ordered the killing of Saudi dissident Jamal Kashoggi inside the Saudi Embassy in Istanbul. "Maybe he did, maybe he didn't." President Trump proceeded to say in so many words that it didn't really matter whether the Crown Prince was responsible for the brutal murder of a journalist. Nor does it matter what message this sends to the world about values and what will be tolerated. As president, he would not put multi-billion-dollar weapons contracts and the associated jobs for Americans at risk by giving a more critical response.

Whether the dollar figures add up or not, Mr. Trump was speaking the truth from his way of making sense of the world. In a way, he was simply being very blunt and honest about the moral and ethical compromises he is willing to make. He is not the only one making them among political leaders of our time or in times before him in the world of transactional international power politics. Like it or not, all our lives are affected and implicated when it comes to benefitting from injustices and false compromises. It is not enough to point the finger and pretend it isn't true.

Before I proceed to say more about the context of our Gospel text, let me say a few words about the word "truth" which appears multiple times in our Gospel passage. The Greek word for truth is *aletheia*. *Lethe* was the Goddess of concealment who kept others in a state of intoxication, which rendered them unable to see clearly. Truth or *a-letheia* means the drawing away of this veil of concealment or intoxication so that people can see clearly. In this sense, truth is *an event of removing a veil*, of allowing us to sober up from a kind of drunkenness. When Jesus says, "I am the truth (John 14:6)" or "For this I was born, for this I came into the

world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth, listens to my voice (John 18:37),” he declares that he is and has that power which removes our blinders. He challenges us to embrace a way of life that seeks to transform pain and suffering for the whole in contrast to the conventional transactional ways of the world with a focus on individual gain and merit.

Now in what context is Jesus saying these words? Emperor Cesar of Rome was the supreme ruler over Jesus’ homeland, represented by his Roman Governor Pilate, and supported by several Jewish puppet kings like Herod who depended on the graces of Rome to retain their limited power. From a Roman perspective, calling Jesus a king as we do today would be nothing short of treason. Any perceived enemy of Cesar was publicly crucified and left to rot as a deterrent. The ways Jesus referred to the Kingdom of God made him an easy target. He was a thorn in the side of many by calling for authenticity and integrity beyond rote adherence to religious practices and beliefs. Jesus upended the temple cult which had left control over a person’s relationship with God in the hands of profiting priests. Jesus reached out to the poor, to the ritually impure, the sick and marginalized, and challenged traditional readings of the law and narrow interpretations of who belonged to God. Jesus offered a direct relationship with a merciful God. That was bad business for the priests and threatened social and political hierarchies. The religious and political forces of Jesus’ time would collude to put him to death.

Let us look more closely at the story. The religious leaders are dependent on the Pagan Pilate to get rid of Jesus once and for all because only he could condemn Jesus to death. Ironically, they are so concerned about remaining ritually clean before the Passover Feast that they refuse to enter the pagan Roman headquarters. Pilate has to come out to the courtyard to meet them. The Jewish leaders accuse Jesus of being a criminal worthy of death but are avoiding taking a real stance on his identity and role.

Pilate finally agrees to question Jesus and goes right to the heart of the matter from his Roman perspective by asking: “Are you the king of the Jews?” In true Rabbinic fashion, Jesus does not respond directly but asks Pilate rather daringly: “Do you ask this on our own or did others tell you about me?” This question points the finger back at Jesus’ cowardly accusers. When Pilate asks further what Jesus has done, Jesus makes an important distinction between the kingdom he represents and the conventional kingdoms of the world. By implication, Jesus is saying that he is a king of sorts. However, Jesus says that his kingdom “is not of this world.” “If my kingdom were of 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 (John 18:36).” I do not believe that Jesus is merely referring to some

a-political celestial realm we enter after we die. When John uses the word “world”, he is referring to the systems and conventions of power of his day.

The particular point of his distinction here is that the “world”, i.e. power politics as usual, resorts to violence to accomplish its end. Ask the starving children and their parents in Yemen. God’s kingdom is one of non-violence that even includes the love of one’s enemy. It does not comply with conventional transactional understandings of power and peace. According to J.D. Crossan, *Pax Romana*, the peace Romans enforced in their imperial realm, was based on total victory in war.¹ This great victory conferred the right to rule and impose a peace based on the dominant power’s or ruler’s conditions. All others had to subordinate themselves and abide by the rules set forth for them. This is not God’s way embodied in Jesus.

In the face of various actually violent insurrections by Jewish rebels, Pilate dismisses Jesus as not really posing a viable threat to Rome. According to John, Pilate is initially willing to set Jesus free. This puts the onus back on the Jewish authorities to demand Jesus’s crucifixion. By the end of chapter 19, the Chief Priest publicly rejects Jesus as king and says: “We have no king but the emperor (John 19: 15b).” This is the ultimate acquiescence to the system and deep betrayal of affirming God as the real source of integrity and power of the world.

Sadly, this emphasis on the responsibility of Jesus’ “own” people, the Jews, has been used as an excuse for violent pogroms against Jews over the centuries. Ultimately, the point is not a judgment of Jews.² It is also not a matter of “Maybe they did and maybe they didn’t.” Remember that just prior to this section in the story, even Peter, the model disciple, denies and betrays Jesus three times. I think the point is that we are all called to take a stance about who Jesus is and whether we want to follow him and that we are all falling short. We all remain in need of the unconditional love and mercy which Jesus offers from the cross.

The potent irony at the heart of the Gospel of John is that by lifting Jesus up on the cross, those who oppose him actually enthrone him in their very attempt to destroy him. Jesus’ willingness to testify to love, compassion, and forgiveness even to the point of death is an event that brings the heart of God into clear

¹ See Crossan’s series: *The Challenge of Jesus*.

² We know that Pilate had a reputation of being a particularly cruel and bloodthirsty ruler. So much so that he was later transferred to another position. We also know that John’s community of early Christians who still identified as Jews were facing expulsion from their synagogues for believing that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. It seems that this led John, in contrast to other Gospel writers (see Luke 23:12), to put the greater burden on Jewish leaders in his telling of the story.

view. On the cross, our contradictions are ultimately transformed by a God who even loves us at our most destructive into a story of resurrection and liberation. The sign that will be posted on the cross states his true identity: "King of the Jews." Yet, we must remember that he is neither a conventional king nor one limited to the Jewish community. Jesus does not want us to worship him on some static pedestal or throne but to follow him despite and amidst our own stumblings.

On this Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday before the start of our new church year with the season of Advent, we all have to ask ourselves how we would answer the question posed by Pilate immediately following our text for today: "What is truth (Luke 12:38)?" What veil needs lifting in our own lives? Will we join in greeting the vulnerable Christ child born into a violent world who will risk everything for love at the heart of God? Will we ask to be transformed over and over again into living a vulnerable life shaped by a hunger for a just peace, compassion and love, even of enemies?

Let me close with the words by poet Adrienne Rich listed on your bulletin:

"My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed. I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world." May we be gifted with such steadfastness, trusting that God will use even our humble lives to be part of reconstituting the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.