

What Is Truth?

A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church

11-22-2015

John 18:33-38

In his poem, *The Fool's Prayer*, Edward R. Sill writes about a king who seeks to have a little fun at the expense of his jester. The meal has been served, and the banquet guests are bored. The king and his guests seek some new form of entertainment. "Sir Fool," the king calls to the jester, "Kneel now and make for us a prayer!"

But the guests (and the king) are soon surprised. The jester offers a beautiful prayer full of pain and authenticity. He opens his prayer, "O Lord, be merciful to me, a fool!" The jester asks forgiveness for clumsy sins and hurtful words toward friends and truths left unspoken and for falling short of the Glory of God. The jester ends his prayer, "Be merciful to me Lord, a fool!"

The sincerity of the jester's prayer is not lost on the king. The last stanza of the poem reads:

"The room was hushed; and in silence rose the king, and he sought his gardens cool, and walked apart and murmured low, 'Be merciful to me, Lord, a fool!'"

In John's gospel, much like Sill's poem, jesters speak truths and kings play the fool.

From its outset, John's gospel tells us of Jesus' authority. And John's gospel tells us that most folks, and especially the powers-that-be, will not recognize truth.

John's prologue proclaims: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory."

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And who or what is "the Word" that John mentions?

The Word is connected with the wisdom tradition of First Century Judaism. Wisdom is an agent of creation in Genesis 1:1, and wisdom is personified as Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8:1. John's Word is this same wisdom.

John's prologue asserts that the Word has always been with God and has been the inspiration of creation (1:1-4), that the Word came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ (1:10; 1:14), that he was rejected by his own people (1:11), and that those who believed his name became children of God (1:12-13).

John's prologue spells it out. Lady Wisdom, the Word, manifested in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the truth himself, will come into this world. And a world dominated by Rome will reject him. Only those persons who can remove Rome's blinders will be able to understand the new kingship – the truth and grace offered in Christ Jesus.

In today's lection, once again, earthy authority fails to recognize truth.

The Chief Priests bring Jesus to the Roman headquarters to be interrogated by Pontius Pilate. They want to bring Jesus up on capital charges, but Jewish laws forbid them from such punishment. So they bring him to Pilate. It's a win-win. They get Jesus out of the way, and they don't get their hands dirty in the process.

Enter Pilate.

Pontius Pilate is the procurator of Judea, and the Roman emperor's man on the ground. He oversees all financial, military, and judicial matters of the province. Pilate is Rome. Pilate is authority. And his word is final.

But Pilate is a little perturbed to be here. This internal squabble among the Jews needs to be settled. Pilate's got a province to run. Make no mistake, Pilate is not an ally of the Jewish leaders, but neither is he an ally of Jesus. And with annoyance, he asks "So what's this all about?" He looks at Jesus, and he says, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

And Jesus responds, "Did you come to this conclusion on your own, or have the folks who brought me here put that in your head?"

And Pilate says with disdain, “I’m not a Jew, am I? Your own people brought you here for me to judge you. So tell me, ‘What have you done?’”

And Jesus responds, “My kingdom is not from this world. 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.”

It’s at this juncture that Pilate asks the first of two odd questions.

“So you are a king?” Pilate asks.

Wow! There’s so much irony in this question. Pilate is the agent of the Roman emperor in Judea. He’s the person most qualified in the region to determine kingship. And he asks this question? Really? Shouldn’t he know?

Perhaps he should. But maybe he’s simply not equipped to answer that kind of a question. For Pilate can only judge kingship in earthly terms, and Jesus has no army, no palace, no royal seal, no credentials, no physical, forceful power. Pilate is unable to comprehend the kind of kingdom that Jesus is talking about. And Jesus senses this.

“Well you can call me a king if you want. But that really isn’t the point. You see, I was born, and I came into this world to reveal truth, to testify to it. And those who belong to truth listen to my voice.”

Jesus is telling Pilate that he is Wisdom personified. Jesus, just as he’s told so many other authorities, is telling Pilate what truth and grace are: God has come into this world to live among us. And through Christ, God has modeled an example of how to live in covenant, and how to build a kingdom. But this kingdom is not one built with bricks and mortar and protected by powerful armies. This new kingdom of truth and grace is a kingdom built of moments and encounters with the divine – moments and encounters where acts of love and service restore dignity to all God’s creatures and creation. It is a world where women and men decide to follow Christ’s example by seeking to fully live into the potential and calling God has for them. It is a world of action. Words of wisdom are transformed into hugs and hot meals and happy smiles and hospitality and holiness.

But Pilate still doesn't get it. And he asks a second odd question, "What is truth?"

And when I first read this, I thought, "Well that's an ignorant question. Surely, an agent of the king should know what truth is." But when I read this verse over and over again, I realize that this second question isn't one of ignorance for Pilate. Pilate never waits for Jesus' response. In the next verse, he moves right on to the sentencing.

Pilate's tone is dismissive. "Yeah," he says, "And what is truth?" Pilate is not interested in the truth that Jesus offers. Jesus' truth offers no political leverage in this situation. Pilate can only judge truth in the same way he judges kingship – he judges it by the amount of power it can dole out.

But unintentionally, Pilate has done a favor for all who hear this story. He has asked us to consider the question, "What is truth?" And here on Reign of Christ Sunday, we conclude the Christian year, and make preparation for the Season of Advent – the coming of the Christ. And I think there is no better way to prepare for Christ's birth than by spending time pondering Pilate's question.

"So what is truth?" I asked myself. My answer: That Jesus, the Word made flesh, came and lived among some folks in the Galilee.

And ever since that moment in history, Christians far and wide: Samaritan Women, blind men, grieving sisters, doubting disciples, city-slickers in Charlotte – all have born witness to his coming by taking part in acts of love and service toward one another. And in this common fellowship, we see truth over and over again. We bear witness to the Kingdom of God. We bear witness to the truth that God lives and dwells among us.

Truth is God. Truth is action. Truth is actively allowing God to be present in our lives.

Theologian Paul Tillich reminds us that truth is like a fog that comes and goes. Throughout our lives, there are moments where the truth of God rings clear, but only for a moment. But these moments do not leave us with facts, and decimal point answers, and memorable details. Instead, these moments become hazy and eventually vanish like the fog. But these moments of truth sustain us until the

next one comes along. We catch glimpses of God's kingdom, and we know that the truth and grace of Jesus Christ exist.

I've been fortunate enough to catch glimpses of God's Kingdom.

A few Christmases ago, I got to hear the women of the Fifth Street Shelter in Statesville sing Diana Ross and the Supremes' version of *Silent Night*, Karaoke – style.

There was the caring pat on the back and the words of assurance a nurse offered me when I visited my sick grandfather, and the big, orange sun that winked at me on that drive home, reminding me of God's presence in the world. Or that nice lady a few years ago, who followed me out of the Texaco station on Queens Road. She watched me drive away with my sports coat on the roof of my car, and paid close attention to my wallet, as it barreled down the road, shooting out bills and credit cards and folded receipts. And she walked up and down the street with me, until we collected every last one.

And one time, on a chilly January night, my friend Matt and I hosted four men for the Room in the Inn. We ate pizza and watched a movie...well really a documentary...well actually not. We watched a six-hour DVD set of Ric Flair's greatest wrestling matches, complete with commentary and interviews. And we loved it! By the end of the night, all six men were donning bath robes and doing their best impersonations of the Nature Boy. Now I know that John's Gospel says nothing of Jesus of Nazareth being a styler and a profiler. And I know that Jesus wasn't a private-jet-setter or a limousine-rider, or a wheelin'-dealin'-kiss-stealer. But I defy anyone to tell me that the presence of Christ was not in the room that January night. For there was laughter and love and dignity and warmth and fellowship and bread-breaking and truth.

I cannot remember the exact dates of any of these events, nor can I remember the names and faces that warmed my heart. But I do remember truth. The truth that God lives and dwells among us. The truth that each of us can be as Christ was to one another. The truth that each of these moments are building blocks for the kingship that Christ proclaimed in John's gospel.

Baptist preacher Carlyle Marney often warned his congregation: “Be careful when you leave this place, because Jesus is right around the corner.” And if Marney was right, so too then, are truth and grace. And perhaps the face of Jesus will be seen singing karaoke or donning a bath robe, or even in the prayer of a fool. I sure hope so!

Friends, “What is truth? And where will we find it this Advent season?”