



Sunday, Mar. 18, 2018

THROUGH JESUS, WE BELONG TO THE TRUTH

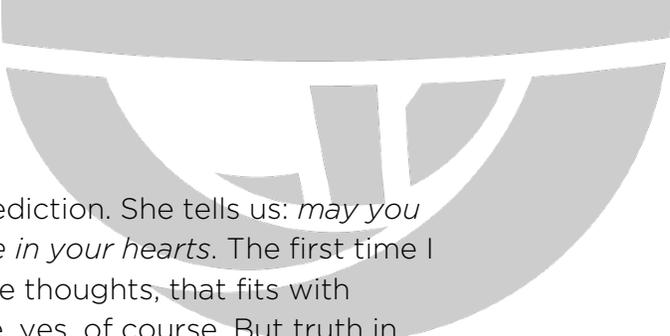
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

JOHN 18:28-40 NRSV

²⁸Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover. ²⁹So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" ³⁰They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." ³¹Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." The Jews replied, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death. ³²(This was to fulfil what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶Jesus answered, "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." ³⁷Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." ³⁸Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, 'I find no case against him. ³⁹But you have a custom that I release someone for you at the Passover. Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?' ⁴⁰They shouted in reply, 'Not this man, but Barabbas!' Now Barabbas was a bandit.



My yoga teacher ends our classes with a kind of benediction. She tells us: *may you have purity in your thoughts, truth in your words, love in your hearts*. The first time I heard it, I found her choice of predicates curious. Pure thoughts, that fits with yoga's emphasis on enlightenment. Hearts full of love, yes, of course. But truth in our words? Not kindness, or gentleness, or encouragement? Interesting.

So: On a scale of 1-10, how important do you think truth is in our society today? (Go ahead, hold up your fingers)

It certainly seems to be the right thing to champion. Teaching children to tell the truth is a foundation of good parenting. Pledging to tell the 'truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth' is a cornerstone of our justice system. Our nation is built around the belief that some truths - like equality, liberty, and personal freedom - are self-evident.

But we also live in a world where cries of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' are commonplace. A world where a little white lies roll off most of our tongues without so much as a second thought. Where, according to a new study from MIT, false stories on social media spread six times as quickly as true ones. It seems plenty of people like to share first, verify later - if at all.

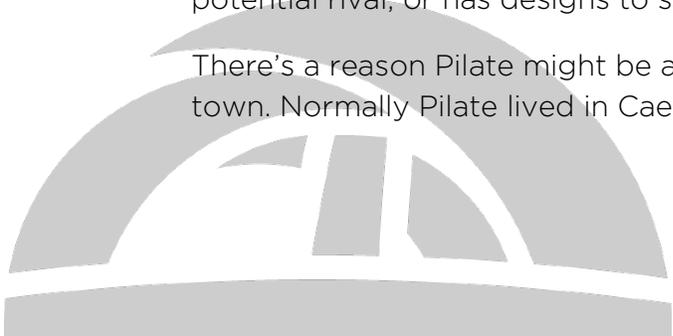
Pontius Pilate's question from John 18 has never seemed quite so relevant: *what is truth?*

That question culminates the first of three exchanges between the Roman governor and the accused rabbi from Galilee. They're often called the trial of Jesus, though it's not much of a trial in a conventional sense. The religious authorities want Jesus dead, but their efforts to stone him haven't been successful. So they have him betrayed, arrested, and brought before one of the elders, and then the high priest. But since Jewish law doesn't allow them to put him to death, they need Pilate to get the job done.

This doesn't look like much of a trial. Jesus gets no lawyer. He has no chance to admit evidence. No witnesses are called. There's no cross-examination. We don't even know what the charges are - when Pilate asks the religious leaders what they are accusing him of, they don't answer.

Perhaps that's why Pilate's conversation with Jesus seems a little like a fishing expedition. He may be looking for Jesus to incriminate himself. And to some extent, Jesus takes the bait. When he mentions that his kingdom is not from here. Pilate tugs at the line. "So you are a king," he asks. After all, if Jesus admits that he is a potential rival, or has designs to seize power, Pilate might have a reason to act.

There's a reason Pilate might be anxious about that. It's precisely why he's come to town. Normally Pilate lived in Caesarea Maritima, a Roman city on the ocean coast.





But during the Passover, thousands of Jews gathered to celebrate when God helped them escape another oppressive ruler. There's nothing quite like having the governor in town and his armies marching the streets to remind the people who's really in control.

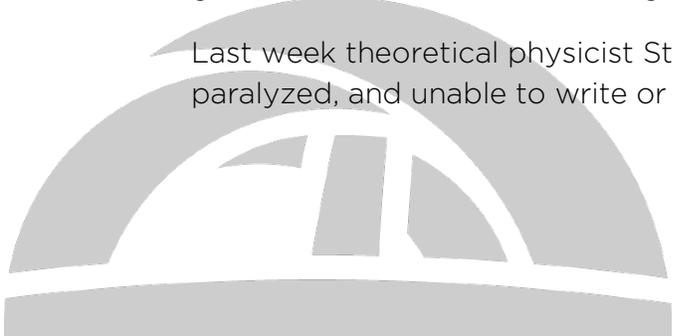
Except, as the conversation unfolds, it's clear that person isn't Pilate; it's Jesus. He gives Pilate no reason to condemn him. He stays calm and composed. He knows who he is. He knows why he is there. He knows what is going to happen. And his words are a clarion call for those of us who have been reading John closely. Verse 37 sums up his message: *"For this I was born, and for this I came into this world: to testify to the truth. And everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."*

Jesus came to testify to the truth. Let's ask the good Lutheran question: *what does this mean?*

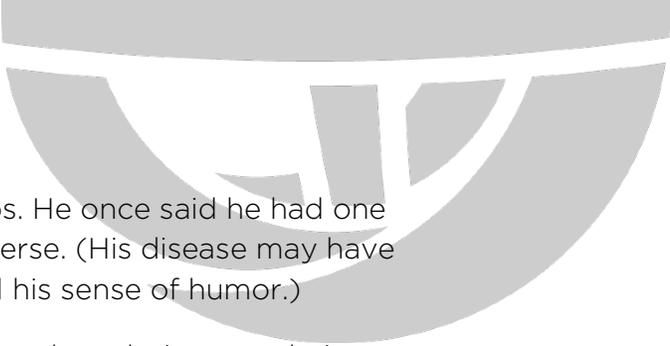
We often think of truth as cold facts and hard evidence. But Jesus' words here point us in a different direction – one with more nuance. Truth in John is less a **what** and more a **who**. The short answer to Pilate's question: I AM. I AM the way, and the truth, and the life, Jesus said in John 14. I come into the world to make God known. In me you see the love God in the flesh. In me you find grace and truth, light and life, comfort, freedom, and joy. That is the truth Jesus embodies. That is the truth we find when we turn to him.

That is the promise in this passage, friends, the good news in the midst of a long, dark night. And that promise continues: *Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice*. I have to admit Jesus' words make me a little cautious. I know I don't always listen to Jesus' voice as well as I should. Maybe you don't either. But think about all the people we encounter in John who listen to Jesus' voice: the man born blind, Lazarus in the tomb, (in a few days) Mary Magdalene in the garden. Jesus spoke to each of them – he paid attention to them. He knew them. They had a relationship with him. That's why they listened – they knew Jesus cared about them. They trusted him.

That's what the kingdom of God is about: It's about a deep, intimate relationship with the one who gives life. And that one personifies truth – not cold, hard facts, but the very ideals that are of God: Love. Selflessness. Compassion. Mercy. Grace. Justice. Welcome. Everyone who listens to Jesus' voice belongs to these things. We are called to a higher standard, to a radical way of being, to the fullness and possibility for abundant life they bring. The truth Jesus speaks of is something we belong to. It claims us. It possesses us. It takes us in. Truth is a place in which we ground our lives, and in so doing we live knowing that we belong to God.



Last week theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking died. Despite being completely paralyzed, and unable to write or speak without the aid of a computer, he spent his



career plumbing the greatest mysteries of the cosmos. He once said he had one simple goal: to understand everything about the universe. (His disease may have robbed him of his physical faculties, but it didn't steal his sense of humor.)

You may know that Dr. Hawking was pretty outspoken about being an atheist. Perhaps it was his personal circumstance, perhaps it was his intellectual bent, perhaps it was his scientific perspective, perhaps he just never felt a divine spark in his heart. I don't know. I do know he might have had an answer to Pilate's question. He spent his life looking for truth. For him, the wonders of the universe were just secrets waiting to be discovered.

After he died, thousands of people posted tributes to Dr. Hawking on social media. They praised his brilliance, his perseverance, his contributions to science. I noticed, though, that many of the ones posted by Christians were tinged with just a little tone of superiority. After all, if ever there's a time we have the corner on the market, it's when someone dies, right? When we can lay claim to heaven and the blessings that await those who believe.

But while that may be comforting, it's a little presumptuous. None of us knows for sure what happens when we die. We do not know the mind and heart of God. All we can do is put our trust in Christ's promises. All we can do is claim Christ's truth for ourselves.

It was in that spirit that I read a comment I found refreshing. It was posted by a chaplain in North Carolina. She wrote, "If Professor Hawking discovers God in the world beyond, I suspect he will be delighted. All his life, he seemed to be almost more delighted in being proved wrong than in seeming to be right."

I hear the gospel in those words: That in Christ there is no judgment. That those who seek the truth will someday find it. That laying an exclusive claim to the truth is fraught with danger – but graciously inviting others to come and see the truth we meet in Jesus is exactly what this world needs today. He shows us how: Speak clearly. Keep calm. Radiate love. And most of all, trust in him, because he will never fail us. These are the truths we belong to. This is the Truth we belong to. Amen.

