

March 11, 2018
Truth Time
Annette Hill Briggs
John 18:28-40

[Jesus before Pilate]

²⁸ Then 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. ²⁹ So Pilate went out to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" ³⁰ They answered, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." ³¹ Pilate 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 fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)

³³ Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴ Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵ Pilate 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?" ³⁶ Jesus 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." ³⁷ Pilate 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." ³⁸ Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

[Jesus Sentenced to Death]

After he had said this, he went out to the Jews again and told them, "I find no case against him. ³⁹ But 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?" ⁴⁰ They shouted in reply, "Not this man, but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a bandit.

Jesus called his disciples to follow him – just, not right here in John 18 and 19. Here, he told them to go away and stay away. This long journey from the garden to Caiaphas' house; and from Caiaphas' house to Pilate's headquarters; and from Pilate's headquarters to Golgotha – here and here and here – Jesus goes alone.

It was the Passover Day of Preparation: the day the animals, the lambs, were sacrificed. Sacrificed in remembrance of God's passing over whatever houses in Egypt had lamb's blood on the doorways during the purge of the firstborn sons. Just as only the most perfect lambs qualified for the sacrifice, only Jesus can do what must be done here, on behalf of humanity, once and for all.

Pilate was the local Roman magistrate. He ruled on behalf of the Emperor, deciding what would be tolerated in his appointed corner of the Roman Empire. Pilate was NOT Jesus'

enemy. Jesus' enemies were the Jewish leaders of Israel, who had what power they had by the benevolence of Rome. They wanted him dead and his movement crushed because they believed he (and it) threatened their religious power.

They were angling for a criminal conviction, specifically for sedition – attempting to usurp the Emperor. So they bring Jesus in front of Pilate. A country rabbi from Nazareth, leading a band of fishermen, acting to overthrow Caesar. *Yeah, I'm not seeing it*, Pilate thinks. And so Pilate says, "*Why don't y'all judge him by your own laws?*" Their answer? *And our law doesn't permit us to have someone put to death.* They are lying, of course.

How do we know that? Because we've read their law, all the different reasons for and ways by which they COULD, in fact, put people to death – usually by stoning – blasphemy being the most obvious in Jesus' case.

Leviticus 24:16 says, *One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death; the whole congregation shall stone the blasphemer. Aliens as well as citizens, when they blaspheme the Name, shall be put to death.* Every time Jesus said his name was "I AM," they had grounds to stone him for blasphemy. It's the text that allows them to stone Stephen in Acts, chapter 7.

But they didn't want blasphemy. They wanted sedition. Sedition was bigger. And crucifixion was more horrible and humiliating. It was originally designed for torture, not execution. Then later someone figured out that if people hung long enough, they'd die.

Only the Romans were allowed to crucify people. By the time of John's writing, the crucifixion was firmly associated with Jesus' words from chapter 3: *And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life* – the takeaway being that Jesus HAD to die by crucifixion. I don't know what I think about that; it feels a bit put-on to me.

What rings true is that the leadership of organized religion used its political capital to manipulate a situation and preserve its own power and privilege. Yes, technically Romans killed him. But Jesus' own religious community engineered and steamrolled his execution to completion. That they were Jewish is neither here nor there. That they existed to welcome people into the people of God – *to be a light unto nations* was the specific instruction to Abraham – and used their power to exclude and silence and crush whatever threatened the scrap of power and privilege they had: *that* was the here or there, if you will.

Sedition against Rome was the charge they sought. Sedition against themselves was the charge they felt. And I would offer, here is territory that, Jesus made plain from the beginning, God's people had no business being. The people of God take our clues about where we belong by where Jesus of Nazareth invited us to follow, by showing us the signs he did for FREE – water to wine, healing blind people, raising dead people (interestingly,

the very signs which landed Jesus in front of Pilate, for suggesting to masses of people that not everything they'd been told of God is all there is to know of God).

Jesus is death to idolized religious tradition. *Are you a king?* Pilate wants to know. *"Who's asking?"* Jesus asks back. *Not me,* says Pilate, *it's your own people calling you a criminal. What did you do?* *"My kingdom is not of 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."* So you are a king? I'm not a big Pilate fan, but I can see how he'd be confused at this point.

"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." Right there, do you hear what I hear? Because I hear Jesus, ever so subtly, inviting Pilate to listen. *Listen to the sound of my voice.* Calling him to think of kings and kingdoms in a whole new way. As far as we know, Pilate didn't take the bait. But with his last question *"What is truth?"* John's gospel – and in turn, I think, THE gospel – asks the same question of us.

What is truth? It is the ETERNAL question, of course: what is ultimately true in this world? What ultimately matters? But it is also the INTERNAL question: what, ultimately, is true in my own heart, mind, soul, spirit, life? Because the answer to that question drives every thought, word and deed, done and left undone, for all the minutes, hours and days of our lives – and our life together as the church.

Eternally and INternally, John chapter 18 says, *It's time to tell the truth about the truth: Is the truth we claim also the truth we live and breathe?* "What is truth" Jesus' opponents know. The world is a shaky structure organized by the law of force – meaning that power, whose other name is *security*, is maintained by whoever is most heavily armed and deeply funded. Rome was the most powerful Empire the world had ever known until that time. They ruled the world by the biggest, most well-funded, militarized force the world had ever known.

Jewish Temple leadership made themselves useful to people like Pilate. For their efforts their religious traditions survived, and they themselves, in many ways, thrived. That Passover celebrations could be held is a perfect example. Jesus came along and, in spite of his repeated invitations to the contrary, Jewish Temple leadership failed to conceive of him outside the world as they knew it. Great big Roman Empire; little tiny Israel inside of that; their personal stake of religious organization and rule inside of that.

Jesus sounds and smells like a threat to that world. And yes, technically, they can take him out. But Rome can crush him and crush his movement. If the world as we know it is the only world of which we can conceive AND the only world we want, at best Jesus will make no sense to us, as he made no sense to Pilate. At worst, Jesus might sound like a threat – dangerous; entirely likely to upset our personal stakes in the world as we know it. But if we CAN hear his voice – in John's gospel, for example – and we are willing to imagine

kingdom as Jesus speaks of it, we will discover internally, the word *truth* doesn't mean what we thought it meant after all.

Kingdom, as Jesus spoke of it in this chapter and elsewhere in John, is both plural and singular. It is his and ours of heaven and earth; it's here and now and someplace we've never been yet. It has no armies, no weapons, no money. The citizens of that kingdom never worry, never judge, never fear and always trust.

They give to every beggar. They are content with what they have, never pining for what they lack. They win by losing, receive by giving, get rich by going broke, stay safe by letting go, get ahead by staying back, break free by submitting, and live by dying. Everything right in the kingdom of God is pure nonsense to this world. A total clown show is how the Apostle Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 4.

Jesus might as well speak *whale* to Pilate, or any of us, if we aren't willing to go ahead and swallow His explanation of *truth*. For that, we have to listen to His voice. Twenty-five times, the word *truth* comes up in the gospel of John, compared to once in Matthew and three times each in Mark and Luke.

Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelled among us, full of grace and truth.

You shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free.

I am the way, the truth, and the life.

Lots more, all of them amounting to the fact that Jesus himself is *the truth*. There is a part of me that doesn't want to be here, doing this. I want to be a professor, who writes papers and gives lectures that make sense. But I'm not. I'm a preacher. I don't have any axioms to prove. The only truth I've to discuss is embodied in Christ Jesus.

And we can understand our lives, in fact understand all things, in the context of this world and its notions of kingdom and truth. Or we can understand our lives in the context of the gospel. The difference is the difference between *memory* and *screwdriver*. One has no bearing on the other. They are dissimilar.

To know truth, we listen to his voice, and keep listening. He has much to say on truth: to have faith to believe without understanding; to walk by faith instead of by always understanding; to go ahead and expect to have an amazing life because Jesus promised it, even when we can't imagine how such a thing could possibly be true.

What is truth? Depends on whether you put faith in the light of this world or see this world in the light of faith in Jesus Christ. It's truth time, here in chapter 18, when everything everywhere is only dark and terrible. Jesus is doing what only Jesus can, having told his followers to wait and to trust him.

Would you pray with me?