

Christ the King Sunday
Memorial Lutheran Church, Toledo
November 28, 2018

Text: John 18:33-38
Theme: To Testify to the Truth

What is truth? As a young pastor, I met with a woman who came to talk about difficulties in her marriage. During the course of the conversation I found myself thinking, "This person's husband is really awful. No wonder she is feeling distress in the marriage." A few days later, the husband came in for a conversation. Suddenly I was getting an entirely different perspective of the situation. I was learning that truth has a way of being shaped by the perspective one brings to a situation. In recent years we have been experiencing an ongoing debate between the main stream media that sees itself as wanting to present the facts of a situation. Opponents charge that same media with offering "fake news." We can find ourselves asking, "Well, then, what is the truth?" Some students of such things offer that we are in a "post-truth" situation in which the facts of a situation don't matter as much as the emotions that are created regardless of the facts, or lack of facts, that are being shared.

The Gospel lesson introduces us to what, on the face of it, looks like the trial of Jesus. He has been arrested in the dark of night, questioned by the religious authorities who now bring him to the governor, Pontius Pilate, the local representative of the Roman government. Pilate initially tries to pass off the situation by demanding that the religious leaders make their own judgement. When they respond that, "It's not lawful for us to put anyone to death..." it becomes clear what their objective is. The accusation is that he is claiming to be "the king of the Jews", and therefore an opponent of Caesar. When Jesus asks concerning who is bringing the charge, Pilate tries to pass the charge to Jesus' religious opponents, "Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Jesus responds in a manner that will bewilder Pilate. "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my followers would be acting in a manner to which the world is accustomed in order to defend me. But that is not the way it works in my kingdom." Can you imagine Pilate's face as he responds, "So you are a king?" Jesus answers in a manner that will now put Pilate on trial: "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." So how about it, dear Pontius Pilate? What will you do to the truth that is in front of you? To whom or to what do you belong? To that, John writes, Pilate mutters, "What is truth?" The question rings throughout the ages, doesn't it?

As we hear Pilate's question, it helps to know that in the Gospel of John, to know the truth is to know Jesus. John will begin with words that are on many a Christmas card, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14). In the Gospel lesson for Reformation Sunday, we heard Jesus say, "If you remain in my word (in me!), then you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." (John 8:32). A bit later he will add, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6) It's a way of saying, "If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. If you want to know what things look like in God's kingdom, watch what Jesus says and does.

To watch Jesus is to watch one who becomes angry when the temple is turned into a house of trade instead of a house of prayer. It is to watch one who reveals himself to a foreign suspect woman at the well from whom he will ask for a cup of water. It is to see one who feeds a hungry crowd, who rejects that crowd's attempt to make him king, and who offers himself as living bread. To watch this Jesus is to watch one who washes the feet of his disciples and who

instructs them that the mark of their discipleship will be their loving others as he loves. This is the way that it works in God's kingdom.

Pilate is not going to buy this definition of truth or this one who in his person testifies to the truth. Jesus had said, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate will choose to exclude himself. He will declare Jesus to be innocent. He will seek to wash his hands of any guilt related to this death. Yet when the crowd cries out that Jesus should be crucified, he will yield to political expediency. As if to confirm his rejection of Jesus and to warn any future competition to him or to Caesar, he will place a sign at the top of the cross, "The King of the Jews." It is as we say in the Apostles' Creed, "...he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried."

Pilate will not be alone in not listening to this truth. His disciples will bail out. Peter who promised to be faithful to death, will deny knowing Jesus. But don't we also know something about how things work in the kingdom of this world. Don't we know what it's like to be suspicious of the foreigner from whom Jesus will ask for a little water? Don't we like to revel in the truth from our perspective and fail to listen to the one who might challenge us with that which exposes us? Don't we resist washing the feet of our loved ones to say nothing of those whom we think should have no claim on us. Don't we understand something of Pilate's choice?

Earlier Jesus had said, "I when I am lifted up on the cross will draw all to myself." How would Pilate know that the words he nailed on the cross, were words of truth? This is Christ the King! This is the one who will appear to his disciples then and now, aware of their and our betrayals, and declare, "Peace be with you." Here is the one who will breathe on them and upon us the Holy Spirit so that we might belong to him, to this truth, to this kingdom. This is the one who will say those powerful words, "Even as the Father has sent me. So I send you."

This is the truth that claims us on this Christ the King Sunday. This is the truth that frames all other conversations about truth-whether those conversations are about what's happening in our marriages, about what's happening in the world, about what's happening in the church-including those moments throughout history when the church has failed in its own calling to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel. This is the truth that brings us freedom to know and share the word of forgiveness, to be fed and nourished with the bread of life, to know what identity shapes our life in this world, to know this one who calls us every day from death to life.