

Series: Truth-Telling
Sermon: To Testify to the Truth
Scripture: John 18:33-38a

Christ the King Sunday
November 24, 2024
Rev. Karen H Roberts

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?"

That question from Pilate has always gotten me: "What is truth?" When I imagine this scene, I never imagine he is actually asking that question to Jesus...I don't think he was expecting an answer. It feels like a cynical, rhetorical question to me. As he turns and walks away from Jesus muttering, "What is truth?" Perhaps I imagine Pilate's question this way because...well...he's Pilate. He is Roman governor at the height of Roman power. For Pilate, truth was never about facts, or evidence, or right versus wrong. Truth was whatever Caesar said it was.

We can, perhaps, best understand this by looking not so far into our own world history...to, say, Soviet Union in the mid to late 1930's. Joseph Stalin was the Soviet Union Leader, dictating adherence to the communist agenda. He had many faithful leaders who served under him. Yet, somewhere around 1936, Stalin decided to change his economic plan, shifting to a plan that would be more harsh for the peasants who were laboring in the farmlands across the Soviet Union. I know I'm offering a much-simplified version of this story, but here's my point...to push a different agenda, Stalin felt the need to get rid of anyone attached to the old agenda, and this meant people who had been loyal to him for years. People who had done nothing against him except having a different opinion on the path forward. So, Stalin began a campaign to punish anyone who was a threat to his new plan...because, well...that's what authoritarian dictators too weak to handle dissent or criticism do. In a short amount of time, Stalin achieved what the history books now refer to as The Great Purge, which is estimated to have killed at least 700,000 people who were seen as a threat to Stalin's plan, and they achieved it simply by taking control of the "truth."

The Soviet Union defined truth as whatever aligned with state ideology. History books, scientific research, media were manipulated to reinforce the Communist party narrative, specifically, Stalin's version of the narrative. Dissenting voices were silenced and any claim opposing the "truth" of the party were labeled treason or propaganda. Truth was weaponize in order to maintain control, not to seek justice or understanding, and many loyal party members were accused of crimes they didn't commit and eventually executed.

Stalin didn't invent this tactic...it was a familiar playbook passed down by many oppressive and tyrannical empires...like Rome. Pilate would have been all too familiar with the use of "truth" in achieving Rome's power and maintaining its hold upon the people. So, when Jesus says he has come to testify to the truth...Pilate scoffs. What is the truth? For Pilate, truth is

manufactured, manipulated. Truth was a commodity to be bought and sold for the benefit of the ruling class.

The irony is, Pilate can no longer recognize truth...even when it is standing right in front of him. Perhaps, we don't either. Jesus said to Pilate, "you call me a king, but my kingdom isn't of this world." We might be tempted to think Jesus is referring to heaven...but what if he means, simply, my kingdom doesn't behave as the world behaves...my truth isn't fickle or fake or weaponized. My truth isn't used to harm or control or execute. Maybe, Jesus is a king that our world wouldn't recognize because in our world kings hold all the power and most of the wealth. In our world, Kings feel entitled to be served and get their way within their kingdom. But Jesus is a different kind of king...reigning over a different kind of kingdom

God's truth, as witnessed through the life of Jesus shows us that truth is dynamic, relational, rooted in justice, compassion, reconciliation. Truth, as Jesus lives it, sets free, empowers individuals to live in harmony with God and neighbor, not out of fear but out of love.

- Jesus is a king who doesn't demand all the power, he empowers others.
- Jesus is a king who doesn't hoard wealth, but encourages us to share it.
- Jesus is a king who isn't served, but instead, came to serve.
- Jesus is a king who knows that truth isn't about intellectual manipulation but instead, truth is revelation. Jesus spent his whole ministry revealing the true nature of God and the world to us. He came to testify to the truth.

When we claim that Jesus is king...or that we accept the lordship of Jesus in our lives, we are saying that his truth is our truth. We are agreeing that in Jesus, truth is a lived reality, grounded in grace and justice, love and mercy. When the world says, what is truth...we point to Jesus...who was sentenced to a Roman cross based on a Roman version of truth...but who was resurrected and lives again because of God's reign of truth – a truth that heals, reconciles, and invites all to abundant life. To claim Jesus is our king is to testify to the truth by living a life that reflects that truth into the world around us. We don't wield truth like a weapon, for us who follow Christ, truth is a light.

The United Methodist Church has a history doesn't have a perfect record of always doing the right thing...but we do try to do better and get it right the next time. We have a long standing commitment to justice and the dignity of all people which calls us to stand against systems of oppression and seek truth, even with society resists it, because we understand that the truth of Christ's kingdom offers clarity in its call to grace, justice and peace.

For the Pilate's and the Stalin's of the world, people are to be used...but to Jesus, people are to be loved, and served, and empowered by justice and equity, liberated by mercy and reconciled with peace. This is the kingdom over which Jesus reigns...this is the beauty of the earth that God gifted us...and for which we are called to testify and give thanks for the reign of one who gives all to us...Lord, of all to these we raise, this our joyful hymn of praise.