

Message and Scripture
24 November 2024

Scripture: John 18:33-37 NRSV

The kingdom of Christ

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 does not belong to this world. If my kingdom belonged to 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."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.

Message: Testify to the Truth

There is a classic scene in the court room drama movie, "A Few Good Men" where Jack Nicholson's character shouts out from the witness stand to the prosecution attorney played by Tom Cruise, "The truth! You can't handle the truth!" which is what I think about when I imagine Pilate and Jesus together in biblical times. Only instead of Jesus yelling about the truth I see Pilate replying in exasperation to Jesus, "What is the Truth?!"

Can you imagine this as a movie playing in front of us: Pilate returning to his palatial offices only to find that once again the Jewish leaders had brought this man Jesus, bound and beaten and thrust him before Pilate for condemnation. Pilate was reluctant, partly because he really didn't want to get involved in internal squabbles here in Judea. After all, he was here to represent Rome and to keep the peace. Law and order, that's what Pilate stood for. Temple politics and mystical religions didn't interest him in the least. As long as people kept quiet and paid their taxes, Pilate couldn't really have cared less what kind of God they worshipped.

He was also reluctant because he could see no harm in this man. Perhaps he was bit deluded, a bit over excited about the God he spoke of, but he was really just a country kid with a messiah complex. To condemn such as one to death by crucifixion did not sit well with Pilate's ulcers.

Yet, he was there to keep the peace, and the leaders of the people complained that he was stirring up the populace. And they didn't take the hint that Pilate gave the first time around and take this poor, bruised, wounded man away. So, he was obligated to at least make some kind of interrogation, to at least ask some questions.

He sat down behind his big oaken desk with the picture of his wife and the paperweight bust of Ceasar himself and said to man they held bowed and bloody before him, "so you are the king of the Jews?"

The man with his hands tied behind his back and his bruised lips beginning to swell said, "my kingdom is not of this world. If it were, I would have subjects who would have risen to fight to keep me from being captured and beaten and bound. If it were, I would have tried to rule and to lead and to act like a king. But my kingship, my reign, comes not from this world."

Pilate, hearing and not hearing, understanding kingship to be a thing only of this world, with laws and power and sword, wanting to believe that maybe for a second there is treason here, leans forward and points an accusing finger, "so you are a king?"

The quiet reply, that takes the steam out of Pilate's outrage, deflates the argument. "You say that I am a king. You say, they say, everyone says that I am king. But I was born, I came into this world to bear witness to the truth."

There is a brief pause, Pilate leans back in his chair and addresses the ceiling as much as the man before him and asks, hoping and not hoping, "what is truth?"

The question is asked. Behind the question lies at one end the bored complacency of this bureaucratic ruler, stuck a thousand miles from home in a backward little country sitting as judge over backward little squabbles between backward little peoples. What could one of these possibly know about truth? Pilate knew that truth was malleable, hammered into specific situations to bring about specific outcomes. He knew that truth was a commodity, like patriotism and power, to be bought and sold for the benefit of the ruling class. You could hear the sneer at the very idea even as he asked the simple three-word question.

Yet, at the other end lies, perhaps, a spark of hope that maybe this man, broken and bruised as he is, bound and tied as he is, can give some kind of response and tell, finally, what truth is. Or at least can say that there is no truth at all and thus end the question forever. Maybe this man.

The response to this off-hand, sarcastic question, the response to this plea for light in a world of darkness is silence. Silence that cuts the easy confidence and forces one to struggle, however ineptly, to face oneself and to answer our own question.

What is truth? How many times do we ask that question? This question which Pilate asks is particularly poignant when we are once more in a time where some want to believe that the truth is mutable, changeable, and subject to opinion. Where once again truth has become malleable, hammered into specific situations to bring about specific outcomes. Where once again, truth feels like a commodity.

At the same time, the silence of Jesus in response to Pilate's question shows somehow that even to ask about truth in the first place is to misunderstand the truth. The irony of this scene in Pilate's office is that the truth was staring Pilate in the face, and he completely missed it and still asked "what is truth". By asking the question he was turning away from the only truth that can mean anything in a world such as ours. The truth is embodied in one who lived and loved and gave of himself to create a sense of connection and belonging, restoration and transformation.

What is the truth, and how do we respond when that question is asked or insinuated by our neighbors, our friends, and our family. Do we respond with silence, or do we share our "truth." How do we witness to the truth that stood bloodied, and beaten, but unbowed in Pilate's study that afternoon long, long ago?

I believe the only way to witness to the truth is not through arguments over what is true and what is less than true, but through our actions. Through continuing to love our neighbors – even those who believe in 'alternative facts.' I believe we witness to the truth when we refuse to stay silent in the face of injustice. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to treat every human being as a child of God. All human beings should be treated with dignity and respect – yes, even if they do not deserve it. Even if they are the very ones persecuting you or a loved one. Jesus treated every person with respect, even the Pharisees and the chief priests and Pilate – who condemned him to die in a horrific manner.

One time when I was a young child and with a family that I loved and thought of as my second family they were – we were having a grand time telling jokes – until they became racist...How many poles does it take...what's the difference between a good black man and a dead black man...only black man was not the word used. Everyone was still laughing, but I knew it was wrong and didn't know how to speak up. I fell silent, and still feel ashamed that I said nothing...

And as an adult all I can think about is the Martin Niemöller quote, “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.

“Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.

“Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

“Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Someone once asked, “have you ever known someone who told you the truth so strongly that you wanted to kill them for it?”

Jesus, this one who reigns, this king who is a king beyond this world and yet who’s kin-dom touches this world through and in us. This is the one who tells the truth so strongly he was killed for it. Jesus is the only one to whom we pledge our allegiance on this last Sunday of the Christian year. Jesus the Christ is not the king because he rules by law or decree, but because he bears witness, he testifies to the truth, the truth of this world, the truth of our lives, the truth of the world that is coming.

Our obedience is to join in testifying to the truth, in love, in invitation, through kindness and through our actions which can speak so loudly in the silences - when it becomes so important to remember that Jesus died so that we might all learn the truth: that we are beloved children of God. Amen.